NATION

TDP MP, ex-BRS MLA test positive for drugs in Hyd

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BUSINESS

FinMin amends public float rules for IPO-bound firms

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SPORTS

Alcaraz's 16-game win streak ended by Medvedev

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SALAR
DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

سالار روزنامہ بنگلور

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Kerala, TN & Assam to vote in 1 phase, Bengal in 2 phases

Result on 4 May; Bypolls for 8 seats on 9, 23 April

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry will be held on 9 April, in Tamil Nadu on 23 April, and in two phases in West Bengal on 23 and 29 April. Votes for all five Assemblies will be counted on 4 May, the Election Commission announced on Sunday.

Compared with eight voting days spread over nearly a month in 2021, the upcoming elections will be conducted over three polling days within a 20-day period.

The elections will see the BJP attempting to retain power in Assam, while it will challenge ruling parties in West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Puducherry is governed by NDA ally All India NR Congress.

A total of 17.4 crore voters are eligible to vote across 824 constituencies in the five assemblies, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said. The Model Code of Conduct came into effect immediately after the announcement.

For Assam, Kerala and Puducherry, notifications will be issued on 16 March, with nominations closing on 23 March, scrutiny on 24 March and withdrawals by 26 March. For Tamil Nadu, notification will be issued on 30 March, nominations will close on 6 April, scrutiny will be on 7 April and withdrawals by 9 April. In West Bengal, notifications will be issued on 30 March for the first phase and 2 April for the second phase. Polling will be held in 152 constituencies in the first phase and 142 in the second. The elections will be conducted at 2,18,807 polling stations across the five regions, with around 25 lakh personnel deployed, including polling officials, security staff and observers. Presiding officers will upload voter turnout data every two hours.

Election Commissioner SS Sandhu, CEC Gyanesh Kumar and Vivek Joshi announce the Assembly elections in New Delhi on Sunday —*PTI*

BALLOT BUZZ

STATES & POLL DATES

Davangere, Bagalkot to vote on 9 April

EC announced that the bypolls for the vacant Davanagere South and Bagalkot seats in Karnataka will be held on 9 April. The counting of votes is on 4 May. The bypolls were necessitated following the deaths of sitting Congress MLAs Shamanur Shivashankarappa and HY Meti. Shivashankarappa, a Congress leader and former minister, represented the Davanagere South, while Meti, also a former minister, had been elected from Bagalkot.

EC also announced bypolls to eight Assembly constituencies across several States. Polling will be held on 9 April for seats in Goa, Nagaland and Tripura, and on 23 April for constituencies in Gujarat and Maharashtra. —*PTI*

Pak terrorist killed as Army foils infiltration in Uri

SRINAGAR, 15 MARCH

The army on Sunday said that it has foiled an infiltration bid along the Line of Control in Uri sector of Jammu and Kashmir, killing a Pakistani terrorist. "Based on a specific intelligence input provided by #JKP regarding an infiltration attempt, a joint operation was launched on intervening night of 14-15 March 2026 in Gen area Buchhar, Uri sector," Srinagar-based Chinar Corps of the Army posted on X "The ambush was readjusted and the terrorist was challenged resulting in the terrorist opening indiscriminate fire. In the Contact a Pak terrorist was eliminated. Warlike stores including an AK rifle, pistols and large quantities of ammunition have been recovered," the army said. —*PTI*

EAM visits Brussels to boost India-EU ties

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar launched a two-day visit to Brussels on Sunday to hold talks with his counterparts from the 27 EU member states. This is the first high-level visit from India to Brussels since the landmark Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was agreed upon in January. The external affairs ministry stated that Jaishankar is visiting at the invitation of EU High Representative and Vice President Kaja Kallas to engage with foreign ministers during the Foreign Affairs Council Meeting. The ministry added that Jaishankar will also meet EU leadership and representatives from Belgium and other member states. The visit follows the historic 16th India-EU summit and aims to deepen India's strategic partnership. —*PTI*

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Tribal woman lynched over witch allegation in WB

BIRBHUM, 15 MARCH

A tribal woman was allegedly hacked to death over a witchcraft accusation in West Bengal's Birbhum district, police said on Sunday. The victim, identified as 70-year-old Churki Hembrom, was attacked with a heavy object and a sharp weapon, leaving her dead, they said. Five people, including prime accused Shibalal Kisku and his family members, were arrested and produced in court on Sunday, a senior officer said. "Our officers recovered the weapon used in the murder. The accused admitted committing the crime," he said. The incident occurred on Friday evening in the Belia tribal settlement at Rampurhat after a dispute between the victim and the accused. "We have deployed police in the village to prevent unrest," a senior officer said. —*PTI*

Strait of Hormuz open to all but US, Israel: Iran

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has said the strategic Strait of Hormuz remains open to global shipping but warned that vessels linked to the US and Israel would not be allowed to pass through it.

Araghchi said the waterway had not been closed to international traffic despite rising tensions in the region. He said many tankers and vessels continue to use the route, although some shipping companies have avoided the area due to security concerns. US President Donald Trump recently said Washington and several allied nations could deploy warships to ensure the strait remains open for international shipping.

INDIAN TANKER SAILS OUT OF FUJAIRAH SAFELY

Meanwhile, an Indian-flagged crude tanker sailed out safely from the UAE's Fujairah after loading oil despite an attack on the oil terminal. The vessel Jag Laadki, carrying about 80,800 tonnes of Murban crude, departed Fujairah at 10.30 am on Sunday and is bound for India. Officials said it was the fourth Indian-flagged vessel to exit the conflict-hit zone unharmed. On Saturday, two Indian LPG carriers — Shivalik and Nanda Devi — carrying about 92,712 tonnes of LPG also crossed the Strait of Hormuz and are scheduled to dock at Mundra and Kandla ports in Gujarat on March 16 and 17 respectively. —*Agencies*

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WEST ASIA WAR DAY-16

A worker readies LPG cylinders for delivery in Bengaluru —*MOHAMMED ASAD*

Govt bars LPG for piped cooking gas users

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The government has barred households with piped cooking gas (called PNG) connections from retaining or obtaining subsidised domestic LPG connections, even as the sector regulator pushed city gas distributors to accelerate PNG rollout to ease pressure on cooking gas supplies amid global energy supply disruptions.

In a notification issued on 14 March, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas amended the Liquefied Petroleum Gas (Regulation of Supply and Distribution) Order, 2000, under the Essential Commodities Act, making it mandatory for consumers with PNG connections to surrender their domestic LPG connections.

"No person having a piped natural gas (PNG) connection and also having a domestic LPG connection shall retain a domestic LPG connection, or take refills of domestic LPG cylinders from any Government oil company, or through their distributors. Such persons will be required to immediately surrender their domestic LPG connection," the order said.

Those having PNG connections have also been barred from obtaining a domestic LPG connection.

For government oil companies, the order prohibited them from "providing a domestic LPG connection, and/or supplying domestic LPG cylinder refills to a consumer who already owns a PNG connection".

The move is aimed at prioritising LPG supplies for households that do not have access to piped gas. In a related advisory, the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board has asked city gas distribution companies to expedite conversion of households to domestic PNG and prioritise consumers in areas.—PTI

>>>More on Page 2, 4 & 7

100 men attack 14 people during Iftar in Pune

PUNE, 15 MARCH

Five people were injured after a mob of around 100–150 men allegedly attacked a group of Muslim youth who were preparing to break their fast at Iftar during Ramadan near a lake at Askarwadi, close to Bopdev Ghat in Pune on Friday evening.

According to the FIR, the complainant, Firoz Javed Sayyed, 25, and around ten of his friends had gathered near the lake, about 12 km from the Kondhwa area, to break their fast.

"We had barely opened our food packets when a group of 100–150 men arrived on nearly 100 two-wheelers, carrying sticks, stones, whips and sharp weapons," Sayyed alleged.

The attackers allegedly questioned the youth about why they had come there, asked whether they owned the place, and demanded that they remove their skull caps. They also objected to the way the group was dressed, the FIR said.

The mob then allegedly abused the group and assaulted them using sticks and sharp weapons,

Police have registered a case. Ten to fifteen suspects have been detained. —*PTI*

AHEAD OF RS POLLS

2 held for bribing Odisha Cong MLAs in B'luru

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

- Shivakumar alleged that BJP had planned "Operation Lotus" and was offering Rs 5 crore to each Odisha Congress MLA.

Two people were arrested for allegedly attempting to bribe Odisha Congress MLAs staying at a resort near Bengaluru as part of the BJP's alleged "Operation Lotus", Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar claimed on Sunday.

Shivakumar alleged that BJP had planned "Operation Lotus" and was offering Rs 5 crore to each Odisha Congress MLA. The legislators were flown to Bengaluru ahead of the 16 March Rajya Sabha elections in Odisha amid fears of horse-trading.

According to him, a senior Congress leader from Odisha lodged a police complaint in Bengaluru alleging that some persons approached party MLAs with bribe offers and threatened them when they refused. Eight MLAs from Odisha, are currently camping at the private resort. They were brought to Bengaluru over apprehensions that attempts could be made to influence their votes.

Sources said that a man identified as Suresh was arrested. A source claimed that one of those involved in the alleged horse-trading was a defeated Lok Sabha candidate. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 2

NO TRUST MOTION DEFEATED

Misdeed: PM on Oppn motion against Birla

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

In a sharp attack at the Congress, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said the resolution brought against Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla was driven by motives of self-interest and that certain individuals steeped in "dynastic mindset" want to confine democratic institutions within their own narrow spheres.

Prime Minister Modi made the remarks in a letter to Birla, days after the resolution moved by the Congress-led opposition for the removal of the Lok Sabha speaker from office was defeated in the House.

Expressed gratitude for the letter, Birla said the prime minister has always held an unwavering faith in the rules, procedures, and traditions of India's parliamentary democracy.

- Every voice raised in the House represents the hopes of millions of citizens across the country, said Modi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses a rally, at Brigade Parade Ground in Kolkata —*PTI*

In his letter in Hindi, Modi said, "The no-confidence motion brought against you in the Lok Sabha was defeated in the House. I also congratulate the members of the House for the decisive manner in which they rejected this political misdeed."

The greatest strength of Indian democracy lies in its constitutional institutions, Modi said, adding Parliament stands as the supreme forum among these institutions.

Every voice raised in this House represents the hopes and aspirations of millions of citizens across the country, he said.

"Differences of opinion are inherent in a democracy. Indeed, it is the diversity of ideas that infuses democracy with vitality. However, it is equally true that there exists a distinct demarcation between disagreement and disrespect," he said.

An opposition move to remove Birla as speaker was defeated by a voice vote on Wednesday in the Lok Sabha after a heated debate. —*PTI*

Birla raises concern over banners inside House

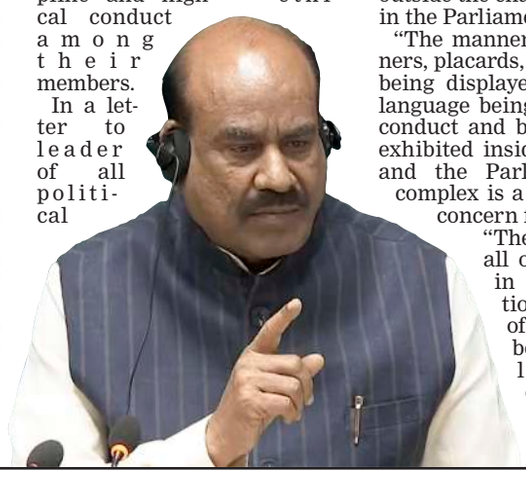
NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla on Sunday expressed "deep concern" over the showing of banners, placards, posters and the use of certain language inside the House by some MPs and urged leaders of all political parties to ensure discipline and high ethical conduct among their members.

In a letter to leader of all political parties having members in the Lok Sabha, Birla said the House has always had a glorious tradition of dignified discussion and dialogue, but for some time now, the dignity and prestige of the country's parliamentary democracy are being undermined by some of the members, both inside and outside the chamber and within the Parliament complex.

"The manner in which banners, placards, and posters are being displayed, the kind of language being used, and the conduct and behaviour being exhibited inside the chamber and the Parliament House complex is a matter of deep concern for all of us.

"There is a need for all of us to engage in serious reflection and analysis of this situation, both individually and collectively," he said in the letter. —*PTI*



—ANI

3 cops killed in Chitradurga road accident

CHITRADURGA, 15 MARCH

Three police sub-inspectors were killed and two others were injured seriously when their car crashed into a lorry on the Bengaluru-Ballari highway in Chitradurga district on Sunday, police said. The accident occurred at around 7am near the Prakash Sponge Iron Company when the car, carrying the five SIs travelling from Bengaluru to Ballari, collided with a lorry moving ahead. The car was dragged for nearly 300 metres, officials said. Three police officials, Amaresh, Manjunath and Sachin, died on the spot, while the injured Lakshman and Eshwar were admitted to the Challakere Government Hospital. Later, they were shifted to a private hospital in Chitradurga and to Davangere. *—SALAR NEWS*

Astrologer held for cheating IT officer in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

The Bharatinagar police have arrested a parrot astrologer who allegedly cheated a 55-year-old Income Tax officer by promising to conduct special prayers for his career. The accused, Shekhar, had gone into hiding in Tamil Nadu after collecting gold and silver ornaments from the victim to conduct a ritual. Police said the officer who was working at the Income Tax office in Bengaluru, met Shekhar near the Sri Circle. Shekhar told the officer that a ritual was needed to improve his career. Initially, he collected Rs 50,000 and conducted a small ritual. Later, he asked the officer to bring gold from home for a bigger ritual. The officer handed over 194g of gold and 1.3kg of silver, costing around Rs 3.1 lakh. Shekhar assured the officer that the ornaments would be returned after conducting the ritual. However, he kept postponing it. Later, the officer grew suspicious and visited Sri Circle to meet Shekhar. But he found that he had fled. He filed a complaint with the Bharatinagar police. The police tracked Shekhar to his hometown in Tamil Nadu and arrested him *—SALAR NEWS*

13 injured as van overturns in Chamarajanagar

MYSURU, 15 MARCH

Thirteen people were injured when a goods van in which they were travelling overturned on a bypass road in the Yelandur town of Chamarajanagar district on Sunday. Police said the injured are residents of Mallaiahanapura in Gundlupet taluk. Among the 13, nine who were critically wounded were rushed to the Chamarajanagar Institute of Medical Sciences. The other is undergoing treatment at Yelandur Town Government General Hospital.
The incident took place when they were heading towards the Srikshetra Malemahadeshwara temple atop MM Hills in Hanur taluk of Chamarajanagar district. The van driver lost control after he attempted to avoid colliding with a bike, and overturned injuring all travellers. *—SALAR NEWS*

Car driver killed in Gundlupet accident

MYSURU, 15 MARCH

A 40-year-old car driver was killed on the spot when a Kerala registered tipper hit his car near Madapatna in Gundlupet taluk on Saturday night.
Police said the deceased, Praveen, belonged to Gundlupet town. The driver was killed on the spot due to the rash driving of the speeding tipper, police said. Begur police rushed to the spot seized both vehicles. They registered a case and investigation is underway. *—SALAR NEWS*

'BJP offered Odisha Cong MLAs Rs 5 cr'

Cong MP alleges this ahead of Rajya Sabha polls as Odisha MLAs are lodged in B'luru

BHUBANESWAR/ BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

Senior Congress leader and Koraput MP Saptagiri Ulaka on Sunday alleged that attempts were made to bribe Odisha Congress MLAs with Rs 5 crore each while they were staying at a hotel near Bengaluru ahead of the Rajya Sabha elections in the State.

In a video message released by the Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC), Ulaka claimed that the accused had attempted to lure the MLAs with large sums of money.

The ruling BJP, however, rejected the allegations. Odisha BJP spokesperson Anil Biswal said the claims were baseless and made out of fear of defeat in the Rajya Sabha polls scheduled on Monday.

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar with Odisha Congress members ahead of Rajya Sabha elections *—X/ @DKSHIVAKUMAR*

According to Ulaka, four people — Birendra Prasad, Suresh, Ajit Sahu and Simanchal Mahakud — had checked into the same hotel where the Congress MLAs were staying. He alleged that they had travelled from Rourkela and stayed in the hotel on Saturday night.

- The ruling BJP, however, rejected the allegations. Odisha BJP spokesperson Anil Biswal said the claims were baseless and made out of fear of defeat in the Rajya Sabha polls scheduled on Monday.

"They attempted to offer Rs 5 crore each to MLAs. Blank cheques were recovered from their possession. During interrogation by Karnataka police, they named BJP-backed Independent candidate Dilip Ray," Ulaka claimed.

He further alleged that the hotel where the MLAs were staying is owned by Ray and that one Jaiswal, who is allegedly close to Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, had also surfaced during the investigation. Ulaka also claimed the accused had called the hotel manager several times.

Demanding a thorough probe, Ulaka alleged that the four people had also threatened the MLAs. "If there is any harm to our MLAs, the Odisha Chief Minister will be responsible," he said.

Eight Congress MLAs and some party leaders are currently camping at a hotel in Karnataka.

The move was aimed at protecting the legislators from alleged attempts at horse-trading.

Leader of the Odisha Congress Legislature Party Rama Chandra Kadam said eight of the party's 14 MLAs had been flown to Bengaluru, while six others, including him, remained in Bhubaneswar.

Meanwhile, the OPCC disciplinary committee has issued a show-cause notice to Mohana MLA Dasarathi Gomango for his "mysterious" disappearance from the state capital despite a party whip asking MLAs to remain in Bhubaneswar till the day of voting. Gomango has been "incommunicable" for the past two days, Kadam said.

In a complaint to Bidadi police station, Congress legislator Ashok Kumar Das alleged that four people approached MLAs, offered crores of rupees to cross-vote and threatened them with death when the offer was rejected. *—PTI*

CM urges Centre to import LPG

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday said he has written to the Centre urging it to explore alternative measures, including importing LPG from other countries, to address the shortage of cooking gas reported in parts of Karnataka.

Speaking to reporters here, the Chief Minister said the state government had already responded to the issue in the legislature and taken up the matter with the Union government to ensure uninterrupted supply of LPG.

He said Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri had assured the state that steps would be taken to prevent any disruption in supply.

Highlighting the wider impact of the shortage, the Chief Minister noted that a large section of the population depends on hotels for food. "There are many people who rely on hotels for food. If hotels stop functioning, it will cause great difficulty and disrupt public life," he said, urging the Centre to act immediately.

Responding to criticism from state BJP leaders that LPG shortages were not being reported in other states, Siddaramaiah said, "Let them supply it then. Maybe they are showing a stepmotherly attitude towards Karnataka. Let them supply it to Karnataka. What will we do by keeping it with us?"

Cooks prepare chapatis and other food items using firewood at Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath canteen in Bengaluru on Sunday; A child waits in queue to collect a domestic LPG cylinder while a worker (top) unloads cylinders in Shivajinagar *—MOHAMMED ASAD*

The Karnataka government has ruled out commercial LPG supply to hotels for at least seven to ten days. As a result, many eateries have scaled down menus, stopped online orders, or switched to electric and firewood stoves.

The impact has been significant across the hospitality sector. Around 30 per cent of Bengaluru's restaurants and darshinis have temporarily shut due to the severe shortage of commercial LPG.

The city has an estimated 30,000 medium-range hotels, with smaller establishments being the worst affected as they lack the capacity to stockpile gas. *—PTI*

22 DOMESTIC LPG CYLINDERS SEIZED FROM EATERIES IN BANGARPET

KOLAR, 15 MARCH

In the wake of a shortage of domestic LPG cylinders amid the ongoing US–Iran conflict, Kolar district authorities have begun raids on eateries to check the misuse of domestic cylinders for commercial purposes. In one such raid conducted on Sunday, officials seized 22 domestic gas cylinders from nine eateries in Bangarpet.

- In one such raid conducted on Sunday, officials seized 22 domestic gas cylinders from nine eateries in Bangarpet.

The raid was jointly carried out by officials from the revenue, municipal and food departments, including the Tahsildar, the Commissioner of the City Municipal Council (CMC), and food department authorities.

According to Sathyanarayana, Commissioner of CMC Bangarpet, the raids were conducted following directions from Kolar Deputy Commissioner MR Ravi. During the inspection, officials found that several hotel owners were using domestic LPG cylinders for cooking instead of commercial cylinders. Some establishments had also stored multiple domestic cylinders in reserve despite instructions against hoarding them.

Sathyanarayana said that with the supply of commercial gas cylinders affected, some hotel owners had resorted to using domestic cylinders.

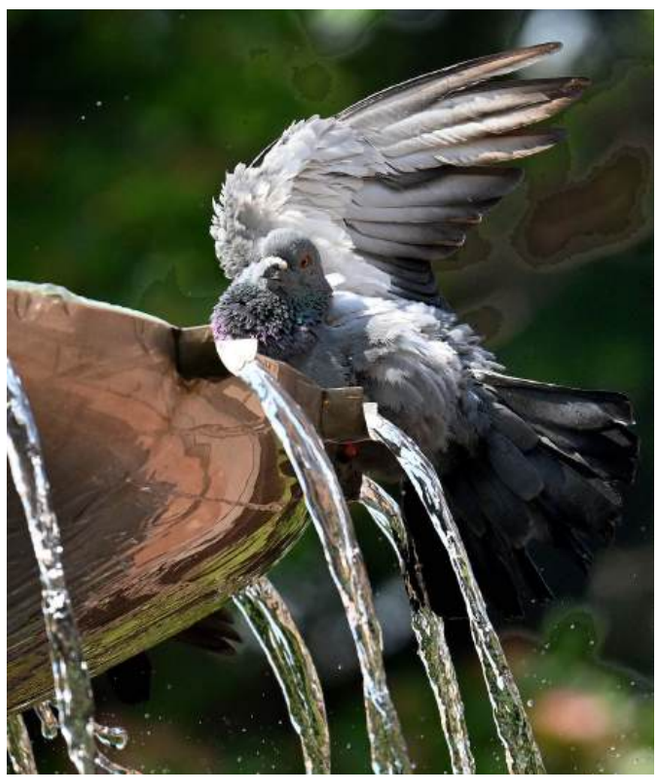
Bangarpet Tahsildar Sujatha said the authorities had also received complaints that some eateries were using poor-quality water for cooking. Water samples were collected during the inspection and will be sent for analysis. If the water is found unfit for use, action will be taken against the establishments, she said.

She also warned hotel and eatery owners against using domestic LPG cylinders for commercial cooking. *—Salar News*

POLL PLANNING

AICC Secretary Mansoor Ali Khan and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar interact with candidates who have applied for the upcoming GBA elections at the KPCC office in Bengaluru, on Sunday *—MOHAMMED ASAD*

BEATING THE SUMMER HEAT



A pigeon drinks water from a fountain to beat the heat in Bengaluru on Sunday. Bengaluru, long celebrated for its pleasant and moderate climate, is witnessing unusually high temperatures even before the peak summer months. The City recorded temperatures of up to 34°C, 2.5°C above normal, with experts warning that the mercury could touch 39°C in April–May *—MOHAMMED ASAD*

MORE TREATMENT URGED

Chikkaballapur observes bandh over harmful chemicals in water supply

CHIKKABALLAPUR, 15 MARCH

A bandh called in Chikkaballapur on Sunday over concerns that chemicals remain in the Hebbal–Nagawara (HN) Valley water supplied to the district received a partial response, with protesters demanding that the government ensure advanced purification of the water before it is released for use.

Protesters alleged that although the water is treated twice before being released into water bodies in Chikkaballapura district, experts have pointed out that certain chemicals may still remain. They demanded that the government subject the water to an additional tertiary treatment, advanced stage of purification that removes residual chemicals, harmful substances and pathogens after the basic treatment process.

Most business establishments remained shut during the bandh. KSRTC buses operated in fewer numbers, while private vehicular movement, including auto-rickshaws and private buses, was largely off the roads. As it was a Sunday, government offices and financial institutions remained closed.

Bandh supporters march from from Sidlagatta Circle to the Municipal Grounds. Later, they held a public meeting at the Municipal Grounds *—SALAR*

The bandh was called by a joint action committee comprising several organisations in the district. As part of the protest, activists took out a procession from Sidlagatta Circle to the Municipal Grounds, where a public meeting was held.

Speaking at the meeting, BJP leader A. Sandeep Reddy alleged that the government had failed to take the issue seriously despite repeated concerns raised by experts about the presence of chemicals in the water. *—Salar News*

—PTI

Rahul writes to PM, seeks Bharat Ratna for Kanshi Ram

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi appealed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday to confer the Bharat Ratna on Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) founder Kanshi Ram posthumously. In a letter to Modi, Gandhi asserted conferring the award would honour the aspirations of millions of people who continue to view him as a symbol of empowerment and hope. Kanshi Ram transformed the nature of Indian politics and through his movements, raised political awareness among Bahujans and the poor, he said. "As we commemorate the birth anniversary of Kanshi Ramji today and reflect on his legacy and contributions, I write with a request that he be awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously," the letter stated. —PTI

'LPG crisis in Varanasi temple is BJP's failure'

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Community kitchens at Annapurna Temple in Varanasi has been impacted due to the "shortage" of LPG, CPI(M) General Secretary MA Baby said on Sunday. Baby called the shortage a "failure" of the BJP governments in Uttar Pradesh and the Centre. "In PM Narendra Modi's own constituency, the famous Temple, which has been feeding thousands daily for decades, has shut down for the first time. It is a testimony to the failure of the Modi-Adityanath governments," Baby said. He urged the government to act now. Prasad distribution at the temple was affected by a perceived cylinder shortage, though authorities said there was no supply crunch and warned of action against hoarding and black marketing. —PTI

Never made casteist remarks against PM: Mani

JAIPUR, 15 MARCH

Former union minister Mani Shankar Aiyar has rejected allegations of making casteist remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, asserting his comments targeted Modi's "character" not his caste. I He clarified he never described Modi as belonging to a "neecha jaat" (low caste), only that he was "a low kind of person" regarding his character. Aiyar denied making the statement that a "tea seller cannot become prime minister", saying his criticism was about Modi's "lack of historical knowledge". He questioned Modi's claims about selling tea at Vadnagar railway platform and blamed misleading narratives of Modi's rise. —PTI

Fadnavis honoured for digital strides in agriculture

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis was awarded an honorary Doctor of Science (DSc) degree by Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyapeeth, Rahuri, for promoting digital technology in agriculture. Maharashtra Governor Jishnu Dev Varma, who conferred the degree at the university in Ahilyanagar, highlighted the importance of technology and artificial intelligence in today's era. This was Dev Varma's first public function as Maharashtra governor. He said the degree recognised Fadnavis's efforts in digital agriculture. The governor also awarded degrees to 4,182 graduates, 346 postgraduates, 74 doctoral students, and 39 medals. He emphasised the role of technology and urged students to serve the nation. Prominent leaders, including Ram Shinde and Dattatray Bharane, attended the event. —PTI

5 states to see condensed polling but delayed counting

Oppn says BJP wanted late polls in WB to dissuade anger over LPG crisis

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Assembly election schedule for five States announced on Sunday has thrown up several surprises, including fewer polling phases, a condensed 20-day voting period, longer gaps between polling days and a delayed counting of votes.

While elections to the Assemblies of Assam, Kerala and Puducherry will be held on 9 April, Tamil Nadu will vote on 23 April, and West Bengal will go to the polls in two phases on 23 and 29 April.

In the previous round of Assembly elections in 2021, voting was held over eight days spread across a month, with the counting conducted three days after the final polling day. This time, the results will be declared five days after the last phase.

The gap between polling days has also widened, with the first round scheduled for 9 April, followed by the second on 23 April and the final phase on 29 April.

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar announces the Assembly election schedule for five states at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi PHOTO: PTI

The most recent Assembly elections in Bihar in 2025 were conducted over two polling days — 6 and 11 November — with counting held on 14 November.

Opposition leaders have alleged that the ruling BJP favoured a delayed election in Bengal due to public anger over the ongoing LPG crisis, while others say the extended schedule gives the party more time to campaign. Election Commission officials, however, said the compressed phases were aimed at making the process more convenient for voters.

- Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Kerala are ruled by the DMK, TMC and the Left Democratic Front respectively. Assam is governed by the BJP under Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, while Puducherry is led by Chief Minister N Rangasamy of the All India NR Congress. The tenure of the Assemblies in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Kerala will end in May

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said there had been a general sentiment to reduce the number of polling phases and make the process more "comfortable".

In 2021, West Bengal alone went to the polls in eight phases between 27 March and 29 April, while Assam had three phases on 27 March, 1 April and 6 April. Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry voted in a single phase. Counting that year was held on 2 May.

According to the Election Commission, there are around 6.4 crore voters in West Bengal, 5.67 crore in Tamil Nadu, 2.7 crore in Kerala, 2.5 crore in Assam and 9.44 lakh in Puducherry.

The tenure of the Assemblies will end on 7 May in West Bengal, 10 May in Tamil Nadu, 20 May in Assam, 23 May in Kerala and 15 June in Puducherry. —PTI

'MCC-Modi's Code of Campaigning': Cong mocks EC

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Congress took a swipe at the Election Commission, saying the MCC stands for "Modi's Code of Campaigning, which is full of defamation, abuses, intimidation, fear-mongering, and spreading lies."

Congress also claimed that the poll schedule announcement "would have been given the go-ahead by the G2, since G1 would have completed this round of inaugurations, ribbon-cuttings, flag-offs, and launches".

The Congress frequently uses the term 'G2' to take swipes at Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, who are both from Gujarat.

The model code of conduct is a set of conventions agreed upon by all stakeholders during the elections. Its objective is to keep campaigning, polling and counting orderly, clean and peaceful and check any abuse of state machinery and finances by the party in power.

EC announced dates for Assembly polls in Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal and Puducherry on Sunday. —PTI

Cong took Rs 150 cr Assam health fund: Shah

GUWAHATI, 15 MARCH

Union Home Minister Amit Shah alleged that the Congress, during its 15 years of rule in Assam, "pocketed" Rs 150 crore per annum from the state healthcare budget.

The BJP, on the other hand, has transformed the sector within its 10 years of rule in the state, Shah said.

Shah on Sunday inaugurated and laid the foundation stone for healthcare projects worth Rs 2,092 crore in Assam, including the Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital in Guwahati and two cancer centres at Golaghat and Tinsukia

The healthcare fund was spent for treatment of 9 lakh children who were never born and 390 Anganwadi centres that were never constructed, he said.

After Himanta Biswa Sarma became the CM, he brought Assam's medical facilities at par with states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka, Shah said.

Shah noted that Assam is the only state where the government is procuring a proton therapy machine for cancer treatment. Nearly 92 per cent of the state's population is covered under medical insurance of up to Rs 5 lakh per year.

The maternal mortality rate, infant mortality rate and institutional delivery reflect the health sector's progress, he said.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma during the inauguration of health projects in Assam on Sunday PHOTO: PTI

ASSAM GOVT SIGNS PACTS WITH ARMED GROUPS

The Assam government on Sunday signed memoranda of settlement with Kuki and Hmar outfits. They are United Kukigram Defence Army, Kuki Revolutionary Army, Kuki Liberation Organisation and the Hmar People's Convention Democratic.

The two pacts envisage the formation of development councils for the Kuki and Hmar communities. There will also be budget provisions for them. —PTI

AAP names list of Assam candidates

The Aam Aadmi Party on Sunday announced its first list of 14 candidates, including its state vice-president Anurupa Dekaraja, for the Assam Assembly elections to be held on 9 April. All the constituencies included on the list are located in the Brahmaputra valley. Dekaraja will contest from the Guwahati Central seat and Renuka Timungpi from Bokajan. The AAP, which is yet to open its account in the Assam assembly, will be contesting the polls here without an alliance with any other Opposition party. The votes will be counted on 4 May. —PTI

Kerala Assembly polls: CPI(M) names 81 candidates; Vijayan in fray

T'PURAM, 15 MARCH

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and 11 of his cabinet colleagues were among the 81 candidates announced by the ruling CPI(M) on Sunday for the 9 April Assembly polls in the state.

The list was released by CPI(M) state secretary MV Govindan here.

Of the 81 candidates announced, six are party-backed independents. The independent candidates for Koduvalli, Kottakkal, Kondotty, Tirur and Palakkad constituencies will be declared soon.

As many as 56 sitting MLAs are in the fray. Vijayan is the only member of the CPI(M) Politburo contesting the polls, Govindan said.

However, AN Shamseer, who is now serving as Assembly Speaker, and MM Mani, a party veteran from high range Idukki district, failed to find a place on the list.

While Vijayan has been fielded in his sitting seat Dharmadam in Kannur, KK Shailaja has been shifted to Peravoor from her current bastion-Mattannoor.

The Ministers contesting the polls are OR Kelu (Mananthavady), PA Mohammed Riyas (Beypore), V Abdurahiman (Tanur), MB Rajesh (Thrithala), R Bindu (Irinjalakuda), P Rajeev (Kalamassery), VN Vasavan (Ettumanoor), Saji Cherian (Chengannur), Veena George (Aranmula), KN Balagopal (Kottarakkara) and V Sivankutty (Nemom). 10 women candidates are in the fray as nominees. —PTI

Didi announces DA minutes before EC presser

KOLKATA, 15 MARCH

Minutes before the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced the schedule for the 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections, **Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee** declared that her government will begin clearing long-pending dearness allowance (DA) arrears.

Her government will clear DA arrears of its employees and pensioners, including teachers, non-teaching staffers, and workers of grant-in-aid institutions, from March this year.

The announcement came within minutes of hiking the honorarium for purohits and muezzins, ahead of the scheduled announcement of state assembly polls.

The arrears relate to the Revision of Pay and Allowances (ROPA) 2009, a long-standing demand of government employees and pensioners, covering salaries and allowances of teachers, municipal and panchayat staffers, and other grant-in-aid institutions.

A section of state government employees had moved the Supreme Court on the contentious issue, demanding clearance of DA dues. The top court ordered the release of 25 per cent of DA arrears to its employees by 31 March, 2026.

Asked about the announcement made by the West Bengal chief minister, barely minutes ahead of the scheduled announcement of the assembly polls, chief election commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said whatever has happened has happened but the model code of conduct comes into effect immediately and no such announcements could be made henceforth. —PTI

9 HELD OVER TMC-BJP CLASHES IN KOLKATA

KOLKATA, 15 MARCH

Nine individuals have been detained following violent clashes between TMC and BJP supporters in central Kolkata, just before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally at Brigade Parade Ground.

Four arrests were made late Saturday, with five more on Sunday, as police confirmed "legal action is being taken." Both parties filed complaints, and police officers, including Bowbazar's officer-in-charge Bappaditya Naskar, sustained injuries.

Eight police personnel were hospitalised; six discharged, two remain under treatment. The violence erupted around 5km from the rally site, as supporters of both parties clashed amid stones being thrown at residences, including that of West Bengal Minister Shashi Panja.

The BJP accused police of inadequate security for their workers. They wrote to the Election Commission, claiming that despite deploying Central Armed Police Forces they were absent during the violence. BJP leader Shishir Bajoria alleged, that several buses bringing BJP workers to the rally were targeted with bricks. —PTI

Centre's wrong decision caused LPG shortage in TN: CM Stalin

CHENNAI/NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

DMK President and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin on Sunday flayed the ruling BJP government at the Centre saying that due to its "wrong decisions", there has been a severe LPG shortage across the country.

"The Union BJP government which has earned the name Failure Model even in foreign policy has caused a severe cylinder shortage due to its wrong decisions," he wrote in a social media post.

He said the DMK led Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA) staged protests across the State on Sunday in view of the shortage of commercial LPG cylinders. "Realising the anger of the people, the Union government must come forward to rectify the situation," he added.

Meanwhile, AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami speaking about Rs 5000 payout by the state government said it showed DMK's fear of defeat in the coming assembly polls.

He ruled out an alliance with actor-politician Vijay-led TVK for the upcoming Assembly polls and underlined his good rapport with both BJP's K Annamalai and AMMK Chief TTV Dhinakaran.

Separately, the CBI on Sunday questioned actor and TVK chief Vijay in New Delhi in the Karur stampede case. This is the third round of Vijay's questioning since January, the officials said. —PTI

Jaishankar in Brussels for talks on India-EU ties

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

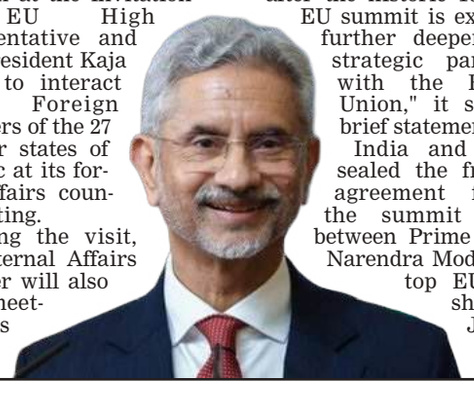
External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Sunday kick-started a two-day visit to Brussels for talks with his counterparts from member states of 27-nation European Union.

It is the first high-level visit from India to Brussels headquartered EU after the two sides firmed up a landmark free trade agreement (FTA) in January.

The External Affairs Ministry said Jaishankar is travelling to the capital of Belgium at the invitation of EU High Representative and Vice President Kaja Kallas to interact with Foreign Ministers of the 27 member states of the bloc at its foreign affairs council meeting.

"During the visit, the External Affairs Minister will also hold meetings with the leadership of the European Union, and his counterparts from Belgium and other EU member states," the Ministry said.

- During the visit, the External Affairs Minister will also hold meetings with the leadership of the European Union, and his counterparts from Belgium.



"The visit of the External Affairs Minister coming soon after the historic 16th India-EU summit is expected to further deepen India's strategic partnership with the European Union," it said in a brief statement.

India and the EU sealed the free trade agreement following the summit meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the top EU leadership on 27 January. —PTI

12.07% LITIGATION SUCCESS RATE

Parl panel calls for paradigm shift in I-T litigation process

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

A Parliamentary panel has asked the Income Tax Department to set up an 'Expert Litigation Committee' to vet tax dispute and called for a "paradigm shift" in the its approach to litigation.

Expressing concern over the I-T department's dismal litigation success rate at 12.07 per cent at the High Court level and 14.50 per cent at the ITAT level in 2024-25, the Standing Committee on Finance said that repeated adverse outcomes point to "systemic weaknesses" rather than isolated legal contests.

As many as 23,230 I-T cases involving a disputed amount of over Rs 3.64 lakh crore are pending before the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal (ITAT) as of the 2024-25 fiscal. 41,321 cases involving Rs 5.65 lakh crore are pending before the High Court, and 6,880 cases with disputed income tax demands of Rs 25,403 crore are pending before the Supreme Court.

23,230 I-T cases are pending. —ANI

The Tax Department had said it treats litigation as a measure to "uphold principles to safeguard the interests of revenue".

The panel, however, said that persisting with legally unsustainable appeals actually drains the public exchequer through mounting litigation costs and clogs the national judicial infrastructure. The taxpayers also face years of unwarranted harassment.

The panel recommended that appeals before the High Courts and the Supreme Court should be confined to matters involving substantial questions of law.

BULK OF RURAL MINISTRY BUDGET HIKE FOR VB-GRAMG

A parliamentary panel said while the total outlay for the Department of Rural Development for 2026-27 has increased by 21 per cent, the bulk of the increase is earmarked for the VB-GRAMG scheme. It said that while severa schemes remain static, very little was earmarked for MNREGA. —PTI

—PTI

Curfew relaxed in Meghalaya for church services

SHILLONG, 15 MARCH

The curfew in Meghalaya's Garo Hills, imposed after violence causing two deaths, was eased for 12 hours on Sunday to allow church services. West Garo Hills District Magistrate Vibhor Agarwal announced that the curfew, in effect from 6am, remains in force for 24 hours unless withdrawn earlier. A 12-hour relaxation from 6am to 6pm was permitted for public movement and essential activities. The order cited incidents of violence threatening safety and property, with penalties for violations. East Garo Hills District Magistrate RP Marak also confirmed the curfew's relaxation to enable residents to attend church. The curfew followed protests over Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) candidate eligibility, which led to violence. —PTI

UP man booked for blaspheming 'Maa Karni'

BHADOHI, 15 MARCH

A case has been registered against a youth in Bhadohi district, Uttar Pradesh, for allegedly making derogatory remarks against 'Maa Karni', the clan deity of the Rajput community, on social media. Police said the case was registered on Saturday at Chauri police station against Sachin Sonkar under sections 196(1), 353(2), and 352 of the BNS, following a complaint by Raghavendra Pratap Singh, district president of Bhadohi Kshatriya Karni Sena. Police cited that posts on Saturday used highly derogatory language about Maa Karni, offending numerous Rajput organisations and raising fears of caste-based violence. —PTI

Bodies of man, son recovered from Odisha shop

BHUBANESWAR, 15 MARCH

The partially burnt bodies of a man and his son were found inside their grocery shop in Odisha's Khurda district. Rajesh Kumar Sahu, 57, and his son Laxmidhar, 27, residents of Sanapadar village, were identified as the deceased. The pair had gone to sleep in the shop after dinner on Saturday, but did not open the shop on Sunday morning. Family members and a villager broke into the shop and discovered the bodies. Police registered an unnatural death case, suspecting that they died due to a fire caused by an electrical short circuit. The bodies have been sent for post-mortem examination. The police said the actual cause of death of the two will be known only after the autopsy is over and its report handed over —PTI

—PTI

Rain brings relief to Delhi from summer heat

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Light rainfall was recorded across parts of Delhi on Sunday morning, offering relief from the heat. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) reported 5mm of rain till 8.30am, with Safdarjung and Lodhi Road recording 0.8mm each. Palam received 0.4mm, while Ayanagar saw 2.6mm, and Pitampura 3.5mm—the highest. Mayur Vihar and Janakpuri recorded 1.0mm and 0.5mm respectively, with Ridge reporting only a trace. The minimum temperature was 20.2°C, above the seasonal average, with a maximum expected around 28°C. The Air Quality Index stood at 190, in the 'moderate' category. —PTI

TDP MP, ex-BRS MLA test positive for drugs in Hyd

Suspect fires in the air during Moinabad farmhouse raid

HYDERABAD, 15 MARCH

The TDP's MP from Andhra Pradesh, Putta Mahesh Kumar, and former BRS MLA Pilot Rohith Reddy, were among six people detained here after testing positive for alleged drug consumption, officials said on Sunday.

After getting information that a drug party was going on at a farmhouse in Moinabad near here, owned by Rohith Reddy, the Elite Action Group for Drug Law Enforcement (EAGLE) force and the local police raided it on Saturday night.

One of those who was detained had allegedly opened three rounds of fire with a revolver in the air during the party.

Eleven individuals, who attended the party were tested on the spot using urine drug testing kits, and five among them including Rohith Reddy tested positive for drug consumption while Mahesh Kumar, the Eluru MP from Andhra Pradesh, tested negative initially.

Andhra TDP MP Mahesh Yadav (left), Ex-BRS MLA Pilot Rohit Reddy —PTI

As part of further procedures, they were taken to a hospital and upon re-testing, the results confirmed that six people, including the MP tested positive for drugs, a senior EAGLE official said.

"The MP initially tested negative for drug consumption, but he tested positive in the blood test," the official said.

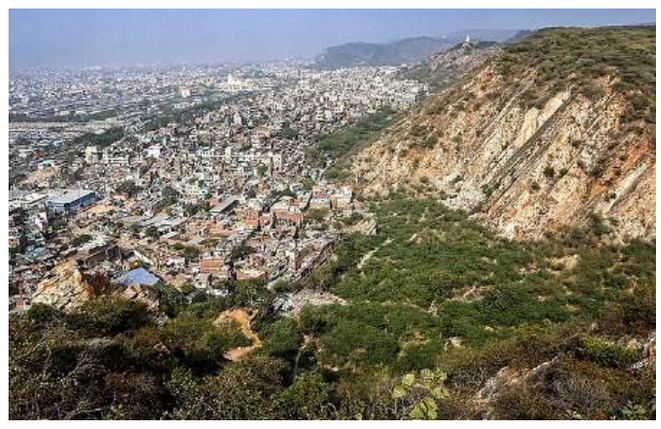
investigation is on to ascertain if they had consumed drugs at some other place or at the farmhouse.

Two grams of narcotics were seized from the party and sent to the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL), the official said, adding that a probe is underway to ascertain from where the drug was sourced.

- 11 individuals, who attended the party were tested on the spot using urine drug testing kits, and five, including Rohith Reddy, tested positive for drugs, while Mahesh Kumar, the TDP's Eluru MP from Andhra Pradesh, tested negative at first

The party was attended by a group of realtors, businessmen, as well as politicians, a police official said. A woman was also among the participants.

The weapon used for firing was seized, police said. — *PTI*



The MoEF said the Aravallis needed a comprehensive study by experts —PTI

Centre clears expert panel for defining Aravalli hills

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Union Environment Ministry told the Supreme Court that it has no objection to the Central Empowered Committee's proposed 10-member high-powered expert committee which has been tasked to provide a uniform definition for the Aravalli hills and ranges.

In an affidavit filed before the SC, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change endorsed the names suggested for the high-powered expert committee comprising in-service and retired bureaucrats associated with the Forest Survey of India (FSI), Geological Survey of India (GSI) and the Survey of India, along with academicians.

The committee is proposed to be headed by Kanchan Devi, the current director general of the Indian Council of Forestry Research & Education.

The MoEF, in its affidavit, said the aspects relating to the Aravalli Hills and Ranges require a comprehensive examination, including stakeholder consultation, by a group of domain experts.

The CEC in its report to the SC said that Devi, a 1991 Indian Forest Service officer of the Madhya Pradesh cadre, has over three decades of experience in forestry education and research, wildlife and forest policy, and institutional leadership.

The other members are Subhash Ashutosh, a former director general of FSI, former GSI director Rajendra Kumar Sharma, climate and energy policy expert Tejal Kanitkar, senior academician and life sciences researcher Jaya Parkash Yadav, senior geographer and scholar Tejbir Singh Rana, former additional surveyor general of India SV Singh, former Gujarat principal chief conservator of forests CN Pandey and former Nagaland PCCF Dharmendra Prakash.

The CEC also recommended RN Mishra, a noted author and Vijay Dhasmana, an ecological restoration practitioner. — *PTI*

B'deshi held for 'helping' Bangla leader Hadi's killers enter India

KOLKATA, 15 MARCH

The West Bengal Police's STF arrested a Bangladeshi for allegedly helping the suspected killers of Sharif Osman Hadi, a youth leader of Bangladesh, flee to India, an officer said on Sunday.

The arrest comes a week after the Special Task Force (STF) apprehended two suspects wanted in connection with Hadi's murder from Bongaon in the North 24 Parganas district.

The accused are Faisal Karim Masud, 37, alias Rahul, a resident of Patuakhali in Bangladesh, and Alamgir Hossain, 34, from Dhaka.

During interrogation, the two men told investigators that a person named Philip Sangma had helped them cross the international border in Meghalaya, the police officer said.

Acting on a tip-off, the STF tracked down Sangma and arrested him on Saturday from the Shantipur Bypass area in West Bengal's Nadia district.

A preliminary interrogation revealed that Sangma, also a Bangladeshi, allegedly facilitates infiltration through the border in Haluaghat (Bangladesh) and Dalupara (Meghalaya) areas for money.

Sharif Osman Hadi, the Bangladesh youth leader who was killed a few months ago —PTI

- Preliminary questioning by the police revealed that Philip Sangma, a Bangladesh national, allegedly facilitates infiltration into India through the border in the Haluaghat (Bangladesh) and Dalupara (Meghalaya) areas for money

Police said Sangma admitted to helping Masud and Hossain enter India after the murder.

Investigators said Sangma later entered India to evade arrest in Bangladesh and moved to several places in the country.

"He remained in contact with the two accused and was trying to return to Bangladesh when he was apprehended," the officer added. Sangma was produced before a court on Sunday, which remanded him to custody. — *PTI*

6 with Pak links held with arms, heroin in Amritsar

CHANDIGARH, 15 MARCH

The Punjab Police said it has arrested six persons who were allegedly part of a cross-border arms and drug smuggling module having links with Pakistan-based smugglers.

Amritsar police also recovered six sophisticated pistols, 60 live cartridges and 3.51 kg heroin from the accused, DGP Gaurav Yadav said on Saturday.

Preliminary investigation revealed that the accused, having links with Pakistan-based smugglers, were facilitating the supply of weapons and narcotics near the Indo-Pak border, the DGP wrote in a post on X.

The accused were operating under a cross-border handler, indicating a larger organised smuggling network he said.

Investigation is underway to establish forward and backward linkages and dismantle the entire smuggling network, he added. — *PTI*

Centre told to file report on Ganga encroachments

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Supreme Court has directed the Centre to submit a comprehensive report on illegal buildings on the banks and flood plains of the Ganga River and the steps taken to remove encroachments.

Justices JB Pardiwala and KV Viswanathan asked the Centre to place on record the steps taken for execution of the notification on the rejuvenation and management of Ganga.

The court issued notices to Ganga basin states and said the issue required a broader examination beyond individual cases.

The matter is listed for hearing on 23 April.

During the hearing, advocate Akash Vashishtha, appearing for the petitioner, submitted that there are large-scale encroachments all over the banks which require immediate attention and pointed out that some parts of these riverbanks are very rich in fresh water Dolphins.

The court was hearing a plea filed by Patna resident Ashok Kumar Sinha against the 30 June 2020 order of the NGT dismissing his plea against illegal buildings built on the eco-fragile flood plains. —*PTI*

Andhra cops bust child trafficking gang in Eluru

ELURU, 15 MARCH

The Andhra police have busted a child trafficking syndicate in Eluru district after unearthing the illegal sale of infants during an investigation, police said on Sunday.

The breakthrough came after a verification of child registration records, which led to an investigation into the trafficking network.

Police said the first case pertains to a couple from Mudinepalli mandal who bought a newborn girl by paying around Rs 3 lakh on 1 December 2024, after reportedly failing to conceive via IVF attempts.

Six people have been named as accused in the case, including the parents, those who helped arrange the baby.

Kumar said the couple had feigned pregnancy and later allegedly purchased the infant. — *PTI*

POLICE BOARD FAUX PAS

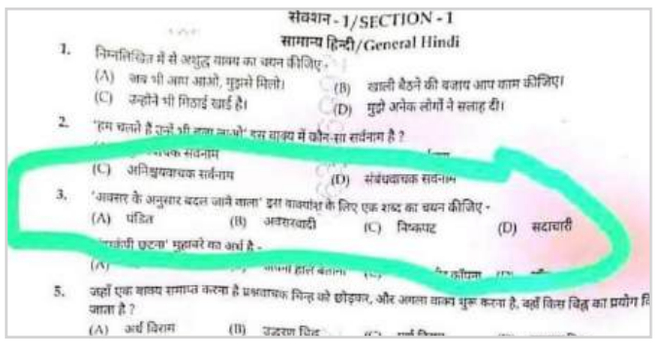
UP to probe 'Pandit' answer option in SI selection exam

LUCKNOW, 15 MARCH

The Uttar Pradesh Police Recruitment and Promotion Board (UPPRPB) has ordered an inquiry into a controversial "Pandit" option given for a question on opportunists in a police recruitment examination after objections were raised by leaders of the BJP over it.

The question, which appeared in the Hindi section of the written examination conducted on 14 March for the recruitment of SIs, asked candidates to choose a one-word answer for a person who changes according to opportunity. The options given were "Pandit," "Opportunist," "Innocent," and "Virtuous."

The issue triggered a political row after Uttar Pradesh BJP secretary Abhijat Mishra wrote to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath seeking action against those responsible for framing the question, saying the inclusion of "Pandit" among the options hurt the sentiments of Brahmins. "The correct word for a person who changes according to opportunity is 'opportunist', but including 'Pandit' among the options hurts the sentiments of a community," Mishra said, adding that the term "Pandit" is associated with knowledge. Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak said the government has taken note of the matter and ordered an investigation. Pathak said it was "absolutely unacceptable" for any question to hurt any group and asserted that action would be taken against those responsible. — *PTI*



SC DISPOSES OF ACTIVIST MEHTA'S 1985 PIL ON DELHI POLLUTION

NEW DELHI
15 MARCH

The four-decade-old MC Mehta case finally came to an end on 12 March when the SC disposed of the 1985 Public Interest Litigation concerning air pollution in Delhi and surrounding areas.

The PIL, filed by environmentalist MC Mehta in 1985, led to landmark judgments and orders aimed at preventing, controlling, and managing pollution in Delhi-NCR and related issues.

The 79-year-old Mahesh Chander Mehta is a lawyer who has been a prominent advocate for environmental conservation in many areas, including air pollution, Ganga pollution, and protection of the Taj Mahal. — *PTI*

Axis Bank told to pay for failed ATM transaction

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

The District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission in Nagpur has ordered Axis Bank to refund Rs 5,000 and pay Rs 10,000 as compensation to a customer over a failed ATM transaction from August 2018, citing "deficiency in service". The commission described the non-receipt of cash after the amount was debited as "a serious matter". It stated that "it is the bank's responsibility to examine such transactions and to give immediate relief to the customer." The verdict, delivered last month, found the bank "did not take the complainant's grievance seriously" and failed to provide a fair hearing through the ombudsman process.

The incident involved a Nagpur resident who tried to withdraw Rs 5,000 from an Axis ATM, but the machine did not dispense cash; however, the amount was debited from his Central Bank of India account. Despite complaints, the bank claimed the transaction was successful and closed the case in October 2024."

The customer approached the commission for a refund and compensation. Axis Bank did not appear despite legal notices, and the commission noted no proper inquiry or CCTV verification was conducted. — *PTI*

CLASS 10 EXAMS CANCELLED EARLIER

CBSE cancels Class 12 exams in West Asia

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The CBSE has cancelled the Class 12 board exams in the West Asia region due to the US-Israel-Iran conflict, officials said.

"All Class 12 examinations scheduled from 16 March to 10 April stand cancelled in Bahrain, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Exams which were earlier postponed also stand cancelled," CBSE Examination Controller Sanyam Bhardwaj said on Sunday.

"The mode of declaration of results in these countries will be announced separately," he said. Earlier, the Board had announced cancellation of Class 10 exams in the region.

Meanwhile, consumers blocked a road outside a gas agency in Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district after failing to get LPG cylinders despite waiting in queues for hours, officials said.

A man photographs the buildings destroyed in an Israeli airstrike in Dahiyeh, in Beirut's southern suburbs —PTI

Hundreds of people had been queuing up from 7 am on Saturday, but when the agency located on Sagar Road did not open till 10 am, an hour after it was supposed to start business, they became restless.A large number of women also joined the protest, alleging the agency operator had given no prior information and had made them wait for hours. Some women said they could not even prepare tea or food for their children, as had no cooking gas.

- Class 12 exams scheduled from 16 March to 10 April have been cancelled in Bahrain, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi and the UAE. Exams which were earlier postponed also are cancelled

Sub-Divisional Magistrate Manish Sharma, who reached the spot with police, got the agency office opened. He directed the staff to begin LPG distribution immediately.

Later, the agency operator said they had adequate cylinders and attributed the delay to a technical problem. — *PTI*

J&K TULIP GARDEN

Asia's largest tulip garden, the Indira Gandhi Memorial Tulip Garden on the banks of Dal Lake in Jammu and Kashmir, will open to the public on 16 March, nearly 10 days ahead of schedule, as warmer weather has triggered early blooming. Over 70 varieties with about 18 lakh bulbs will be on display, marking the start of the Kashmir Valley's tourism season. Tulips typically bloom for three to four weeks, though harsh weather can shorten their life span. The garden was opened in 2008 – *X/@OMARABDULLAH*

Trump is growing agitated amid scrutiny over Iran war

In the two weeks since the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran, US President Donald Trump has increasingly been knocked on his political heels.

He's grown more agitated with news coverage and has failed to find a way to explain why he started the war — or how he will end it — that resonates with a public concerned by American deaths in the conflict, surging oil prices and dropping financial markets. Even some of his supporters are questioning his plan and his overall poll numbers are declining.

Meanwhile, Moscow is getting a boost from the war's early days after Trump eased sanctions on some Russian oil shipments. That, combined with rising oil prices, undercut the yearslong push to crimp President Vladimir Putin's ability to wage war in Ukraine.

Then there are Democrats, who were left reeling after Trump won the 2024 election. With control of Congress at stake in November's midterms, the party has come together to oppose Trump's Iran policy and point to the economic turmoil as proof that Republicans haven't kept their promises to bring down everyday costs.

"I think Democrats are well-positioned for this November and the midterms," said Kelly Dietrich, CEO of the National Democratic Training Committee.

"They're flying by the seat of their pants, and rest of us are paying the price," he said.

Moscow is getting a boost from the war's early days after US President Donald Trump eased sanctions on some Russian oil shipments *–PTI*

TRUMP SEEKS HELP SECURING THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ

On Saturday, Trump spent hours at his golf club in West Palm Beach, Florida, before attending a closed-door fundraiser for his MAGA Inc. super PAC at his Mar-a-Lago estate.

Last weekend, he also golfed at another of his South Florida properties a day after witnessing the dignified transfer for six US soldiers killed in the Iran war. That death toll rose this past week.

Trump is increasingly complaining about media coverage of the conflict, on Saturday writing: "Media actually want us to lose the War." His broadcast regulator subsequently threatened to pull broadcast licenses unless they "correct course."

The President also for the first time suggested the US would need to lean on the international community to help oil tankers move through the Strait of Hormuz, where transportation has been severely disrupted, throwing global energy markets into a tailspin.

Iran has said it plans to keep up attacks on energy infrastructure and use its effective closure of the strait as leverage against the United States and Israel. A fifth of the world's traded oil flows through the waterway.

"Many Countries, especially those who are affected by Iran's attempted closure of the Hormuz Strait, will be sending War Ships, in conjunction with the United States of America, to keep the Strait open and safe," Trump wrote on Saturday, later adding, "this should have always been a team effort."

It was not clear if that multi-nation push was set to begin or if Trump only hoped it might, however.

That's because he also wrote: "Hopefully China, France, Japan, South Korea, the UK, and others, that are affected" will "send Ships to the area so that the Hormuz Strait will no longer" be threatened by Iran.

Trump had pledged at the beginning of the war that US naval ships would escort tankers through the waterway. But that hasn't happened yet.

THE WAR HAS FAR-REACHING POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The US Treasury Department also announced this past week a 30-day waiver on Russian sanctions aiming to free up Russian oil cargoes stranded at sea to help ease supply shortages caused by the Iran war.

That's despite analysts saying that spiraling oil prices due to Persian Gulf production blockages are benefiting the Russian economy. Moscow relies heavily on oil revenue to finance its war on Ukraine, and sanctions were a growing handicap.

Some of Washington's key allies have decried the move as empowering Putin. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called easing sanctions "not the right decision" and "certainly does not help peace" because it leads to a "strengthening of Russia's position."

With midterm races now starting to heat up, Trump was asked Friday night about his message to voters who believe gas is too expensive.

The longer the conflict goes, the more pronounced questions about the midterms will become.

Iran also has even divided Trump's "Make America Great Again" base, between those who support the action and others who say that Trump expressly campaigned on ending wars.

Leading figures on the right, including Tucker Carlson and Megyn Kelly, have sharply criticised Trump.

Trump, though, has continued to insist that he created the MAGA movement and that it will follow him anywhere, on any issue.

The political turbulence has some Democrats predicting their party could see midterm gains rivalling 2018's "blue wave" election during Trump's first term. *—PTI*

SALAR

Salt air & quiet hope surround Vijay's TVK HQ

- Mostly young people — die-hard fans of actor-politician Vijay — queue up daily, waiting for hours to bag posts in the party. For these supporters, the shift from 'Thalapathy' fans to TVK cadres is more of a pilgrimage than a career move. However, for many, the political plunge has required significant professional sacrifices.

While the world outside chatters nonstop about potential alliances, a quiet hope permeates the salt-soaked air at the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) headquarters in Panaiyur, Chennai.

Inside the swanky new beachside office, with its imposing white walls, the transition from fan following to political force is taking a tangible, human shape.

Mostly young people — die-hard fans of actor-politician Vijay — queue up daily, waiting for hours to bag posts in the party. For these supporters, the shift from 'Thalapathy' fans to TVK cadres is more of a pilgrimage than a career move.

However, for many, the political plunge has required significant professional sacrifices.

Samuel, 33, a mechanic, recalls it was not easy convincing his family that he might have to be "jobless" initially. "It was not possible to hold on to my job in a workshop. TVK is just starting out, there's a lot of work to be done. We are expected to pitch in, especially with outreach," Samuel says.

He says he got married recently. "So, I understand their concern. Who would like it if "pudhu mappilai" (new husband) is jobless?" Samuel adds.

But now that he is promised a ward secretary post, Samuel says he is glad he stood his ground.

Vidya, all of 28 and a resident of Pallavaram, is a lot luckier than Samuel.

A nurse by profession, Vidya says she invested in a small neighbourhood clinic in Pallavaram that now runs on its own, leaving her time to "indulge in politics".

"We are financially sorted for now. My husband used to be a contract worker for local municipality, driving earth movers for them. He quit his job, got himself an auto, as that gives him flexibility when it comes to working time," says Vidya.

Vidya says she quit being "just a fan" eight years ago. "Thalapathy has been an inspiration beyond cinema halls. I wanted to follow his example and give something back to the society, so I joined Vijay Makkal Iyakkam eight years ago and started volunteering. We used to collect funds, go to schools and distribute uniforms and notebooks," Vidya says, adding that she met her husband while volunteering.

When Vijay made a decision to enter politics, she said they were only happy to follow his lead.

"By then we were married and my husband, Vijaykanth, who is even a bigger fan than I am -- he actually worships the ground that Vijay walks in -- encouraged me to join politics as well," Vidya says.

It helped that her entire family had great respect for Thalapathy, Vidya adds.

"My in-laws were also okay with it; in fact, they take care of my son and daughter when I have to travel for work," Vidya says.

Vignesh, 35, who's been promised the Chengalpattu district secretary post and who drives an auto "on and off" when he is not busy with party work, says he feels the pinch, but every time he meets people, he is amazed by the welcome TVK gets.

"I have been long associated with Vijay Makkal Iyakkam and have been doing a lot of social work in Thalapathy's name. But this is something else, when we go meet people door-to-door, especially, we are so warmly welcomed. People are really fed up with all that corruption," Vignesh says.

Vignesh says he is energised by all that positive feedback. "It makes me hopeful for a better future -- for the people around me and for me as well."

Vignesh is also aware that "inexperience" is TVK's Achilles' heel. "So, I understand that we will have to balance it out with experienced politicians from other parties and even alliances. But I do hope that we hold on to our key ideology -- to weed out corruption," Vignesh says.

An alliance with the BJP-AIADMK, he points out, will go against the very grain of TVK.

Vidya too says she was shocked when she read in the newspapers that TVK is going to form an alliance with the BJP.

"It came as a great relief when the party high command denied it immediately," Vidya added.

However, Aishwaraya, yet another die-hard fan of Vijay -- who made news when she tonsured her head to protest the postponement of 'Jana Nayagan' -- her faith in her idol is so big that she says she will do whatever he says.

"There is no way he will mislead us. There will always be a reason why he will choose a particular path," Aishwaraya insists.

A graphic designer running her own business in Anakaputhur, Aishwaraya says she earns enough to run her family and could spare time to pursue her dreams.

"And my dream is to overcome all challenges and install Thalapathy Vijay as CM," she adds. *—PTI*

When Vijay made a decision to enter politics, people were only happy to follow his lead *–PTI*

LETTERS

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As commercial space tech shapes Iran war, int'l law falls behind

- On 10 March, Planet Labs extended the delay time to two weeks for non-government users, but the US military still receives immediate access. Modern warfare depends heavily on these kinds of commercial, dual-use space systems. The same satellites that time financial transactions, support hospitals and manage global logistics also guide military operations.

When the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury against Iran nearly two weeks ago, the first confirmation didn't come from governments. It came from commercial satellites.

Images from US companies Planet Labs and Vantor captured smoke billowing over central Tehran and ships burning at the coastal city of Konarak – evidence of strikes on naval bases, airfields and missile sites that global media confirmed within hours.

But space-based technology was not just observing the conflict, it was also a target. US officials said early strikes hit "Iran's equivalent of Space Command", undermining Tehran's ability to coordinate via satellite.

Iran has also used extensive "spoofing" to create false GPS signals to mislead receivers about their true location.

Simultaneously, US Space Command and Cyber Command launched operations to jam, hack and disrupt Iranian software systems, known as "non-kinetic" attacks in the jargon of modern warfare.

Such operations are a kind of "silent sabotage", disabling communications or corrupting GPS signals without blowing anything up with conventional "kinetic" attacks.

This combination of advanced battlefield tactics and the rapid commercialisation of space technology, as well as the erosion of the old rules-based order in general, means international law is now falling well behind.

BLURRED LINES OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Non-kinetic tactics have quickly spilled into civilian life. In January, amid anti-government protests, and later during the first wave of strikes, Iran used GPS jamming and spoofing to disrupt Starlink terminals, which civilians and protesters depended on to stay online and share information during internet blackouts.

At the same time, commercial satellite imagery became part of the conflict itself. After Planet Lab's images revealed Iranian retaliatory strikes on US and US-linked sites in the Persian Gulf, the company delayed releasing new imagery to avoid aiding real time damage assessment by Iranian forces.

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Modern warfare depends heavily on these kinds of commercial, dual-use space systems. The same satellites that time financial transactions, support hospitals and manage global logistics also guide military operations.

Images from US companies Planet Labs and Vantor captured smoke billowing over central Tehran and ships burning at the coastal city of Konarak *–PTI*

This blurs the traditional legal boundary between civilian and military objects and activities. The International Committee of the Red Cross has warned repeatedly that interference with satellites can harm civilians by disrupting power grids, navigation, emergency services and humanitarian operations.

Outer space is not a legal vacuum. The United Nations' Outer Space Treaty, the UN Charter itself, and international humanitarian law all apply to warfare in orbit. But the Iran war shows how real world practice is advancing faster than these legal frameworks.

A PROPER TREATY IS UNLIKELY

Dual-use satellites providing both civilian broadband and military communications also complicate decisions about what constitutes a lawful target. Legal experts say satellites providing essential civilian services should be presumed to be non-military unless direct military use is demonstrated. But this precept is tested daily in Iran.

Another challenge is political neutrality. If a private company based in a neutral state provides data that can assist military operations elsewhere, the neutral state may face serious questions and diplomatic pressure from other governments about whether it should be held responsible. The law has not caught up with these commercial realities. Planet Lab's imagery delays show how companies are having to improvise policy themselves during armed conflict.

And because cyber-attacks can disable military systems without causing physical destruction, they can fall short of "armed attack" thresholds under international law. States can exploit this legal grey zone to gain a strategic advantage.

New legal norms may eventually evolve out of the behaviour of governments and commercial operators rather than through formal agreements and treaties. Indeed, geopolitical tensions make a new treaty on military space operations highly unlikely.

This leaves companies, regulators and militaries to define the boundaries of acceptable conduct through their real time responses. The result is a battlefield where satellites shape strategy faster than lawmakers can respond *—PTI*

—WIKIPEDIA

Admit there's problem with UNSC: UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, 15 MARCH

UN chief Antonio Guterres has said there is a need to recognise "we have a problem with the Security Council", which does not reflect the current world and is not allowed to stop conflicts because of the use of veto by its permanent members. Guterres told media in Beirut on Saturday that three permanent members of the 15-nation Council are from Europe, one from Asia, and one is the United States with no permanent members from Africa or Latin America. UNSC has a problem of legitimacy and efficiency because of the vetoes. In situations of conflict when it's necessary to stop the conflict, there is a veto that emerges, and does not allow the Council to act, he added. —*PTI*

7 Indian pilgrims die in Nepal bus accident

KATHMANDU, 15 MARCH

A passenger bus carrying Indian pilgrims veered off the road and plunged down a slope in central Nepal, killing seven people and injuring as many others, police said. The incident took place in Nepal's Gandaki province on Saturday. A microbus carrying pilgrims was returning from Manakamana Temple when it plunged off the road in Gorkha District, according to the police. Suraj Aryal, chief of the District Traffic Police Office, Gorkha district, said that the deceased included two women and five men, all Indian nationals who had travelled to Manakamana for worship. Seven other injured passengers are undergoing treatment at a hospital in Anbukhaireni. Further investigation is underway, police said. —*PTI*

'US forced-labour probe looks at 60 countries'

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

A second trade investigation launched by the US into alleged forced labour practices across 60 economies, including India and China, is expected to place particular scrutiny on Beijing amid allegations of forced labour in the Xinjiang region, think tank GTRI said on Sunday. India's exports of solar panels, electronics and garments to the US may also face closer scrutiny under this new US investigation into forced labour in global supply chains, the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said. On 12 March, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) launched a Section 301 probe, covering 60 economies. This is the second Section 301 probe this month. —*PTI*

May hit Kharg Island again for fun: Trump

US strikes 'demolished' Iran's oil infra: Don

WASHINGTON DC, 15 MARCH

US President **Donald Trump** has warned that the United States may carry out additional strikes on Kharg Island, a key hub for Iran's oil exports, amid escalating tensions in the region.

In an interview with NBC News on Saturday, Trump said earlier US strikes had "totally demolished" much of the island's oil infrastructure and suggested further attacks could follow. "We may hit it a few more times just for fun," he remarked.

During the ongoing hostilities, US forces have launched airstrikes against military installations on Kharg Island, targeting missile storage facilities and other defence sites. Earlier reports had indicated that oil export infrastructure remained largely intact, but Trump said the island itself had been struck.

He claimed US forces had "obliterated" military installations on Kharg Island, located in the Persian Gulf about 30 km off Iran's coast near Bushehr. The island is considered Iran's economic lifeline, handling roughly 90 per cent of the country's crude oil exports.

Although the== oil terminals were not the main targets of the recent strikes, Trump warned that energy infrastructure could become a direct target if Iran continue efforts to disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

Trump has suggested that international partners may need to help secure the strategic strait, where shipping disruptions have unsettled global energy markets. Nearly one-fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas typically passes through the narrow waterway between Iran and Oman.

Trump asks nations to send warships to Hormuz

In posts on Truth Social, Trump urged countries dependent on the route to take responsibility for protecting it. "The countries of the world that receive oil through the Hormuz Strait must take care of that passage, and we will help — a lot," he wrote.

He said nations including China, France, Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom could send naval vessels to keep the route open, though no clear plan has been confirmed.

Despite the uncertainty, Trump recently told supporters at a rally in Kentucky that the United States had already "won" the conflict, even as Western powers continue to strengthen their military presence in the eastern Mediterranean. —*PTI*

Smoke rise after debris from an intercepted Iranian drone struck an oil facility in Fujair, UAE on Saturday —*PTI*

Gulf states down missiles; Iran vows to widen attacks

WEST ASIA WAR DAY-16

CAIRO, 15 MARCH

Gulf Arab states reported missile attacks on Sunday after Iran threatened to widen its campaign and called for the evacuation of three major UAE ports.

Israel said it continued to hit Iran on Sunday as Bahrain. Saudi Arabia and the UAE said they are trying to intercept projectiles.

Iran accused the US of using the UAE to attack Kharg Island handling Iran's oil exports. Gulf countries have denied allowing their land for operations against Iran.

Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, said that the Unites States attacked Kharg and Abu Musa islands from the UAE. The US Central Command did not respond to Iran's claim.

Anwar Gargash, an adviser to UAE President, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, rejected Iran's claim that the US used UAE for attacking Kharg.

MOUNTING TOLL

After the war started, Iranian attacks have killed a dozen civilians in Gulf countries.

In Iran, the ICRC said around 1,300 people has been killed. Iran's Health Ministry says 223 women and 202 children have been killed.

In Israel, 12 people have been killed by Iranian missiles, and more have been injured, including three on Sunday. At least 13 US soldiers have also been killed.

Meanwhile, at least 820 people have been killed in Lebanon, and 850,000 have been displaced.

RAIN MISERY IN LEBANON

In downtown Beirut, displaced families fixed tents battered by wind and rain on Sunday.

Fadi Younes, displaced from Beirut's southern suburbs, told AP that his mattresses and blankets were soaked.

More Iranian missiles hit Israel

Iran fired missiles towards Israel on Sunday. Several missiles hit central Israel and the Tel Aviv area.

Israel's rescue service released a video showing a large crater in a street.

US IDENTIFIES 6 KILLED IN AIRCRAFT CRASH

The US Department of Defence on Saturday identified six service members who died when a military refuelling aircraft crashed on Thursday. —*PTI*

Bibi's office debunks death claims after AI row

TEL AVIV, 15 MARCH

The office of Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** has dismissed rumours of his assassination after social media posts claimed he had been killed.

Responding to a query from Anadolu Agency, Netanyahu's office said the reports were false, stating: "These are fake news; the Prime Minister is fine."

The speculation gained traction after Netanyahu posted a video of a press conference on Friday about the ongoing conflict involving the US, Israel and Iran. Some users alleged the footage was AI-generated, claiming to see six fingers on his right hand. Viewers pointed to a moment around the 0.35 mark where he raises his hands, calling the apparent extra flesh near his little finger a "classic AI finger glitch".

US commentator Candace Owens fuelled speculation asking: "Where's Bibi?" while questioning why his office was "releasing and deleting AI videos." Meanwhile, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, cited by Fars News Agency, vowed to "continue pursuing Netanyahu and kill him with full force". —*PTI*

After attacks on oil depots, black rain endangers Iranians

WHO warned that the 'black rain' and toxic compounds in Iran's air after attacks on oil facilities by US-Israeli could cause respiratory problems. –*x*

DUBAI, 15 MARCH

Clouds of toxic smoke released by US–Israeli airstrikes on Iranian oil facilities have returned to the ground as "black rain", raising health concerns, international experts have warned.

Residents in Tehran reported burning eyes and breathing difficulties when dark, oily rain fell near the capital last week after fuel depots and a refinery were hit. Plumes of smoke have also been seen across the region during the two weeks of war.

Black rain occurs when soot, ash and toxic chemicals mix with water droplets in the atmosphere and fall to the ground during rainfall. It is commonly seen after oil refinery fires but can also follow wildfires, volcanic eruptions and heavy industrial pollution.

Experts said microscopic soot forms when hydrocarbons in fuel oil burn incompletely. Burning oil also produces polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, as well as gases such as sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides that contribute to acid rain.

These particles are about 40 times smaller than the width of a human hair and can penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream, causing respiratory and heart problems and cancer.

Iranian authorities and the World Health Organisation have advised residents to stay indoors and wear masks. Officials warned the rain may be highly acidic, capable of irritating skin and damaging the lungs.

Scientists say most soot and chemicals from fires that burn out quickly or wash out of the atmosphere within three to seven days. However, experts caution that further strikes on oil facilities could prolong pollution risks. —*PTI*

Israel kills pregnant woman, kids in Gaza

RAMALLAH, 15 MARCH

Israeli soldiers fired on a car Israeli forces killed eight Palestinians, including a pregnant women and three children, in separate incidents in West Bank and Gaza.

Israeli soldiers opened fire on a car carrying a family on Saturday, killing parents and two children among them,in the West Bank.

The family had gone out to buy new clothes for the upcoming Eid ul-Fitr holiday when the shooting occurred. Israel said it was investigating the incident.

Smoke from an explosion after Israeli raid refugee camp –*x*

The Palestinian Red Crescent rescue service said Ali and Waed Odeh and two of their four children were shot in the head. Their two surviving children suffered shrapnel injuries. The group also accused Israeli forces of delaying ambulances dispatched to the scene.

Israel's military and police said troops opened fire after a car accelerated towards them in Tammun while they were pursuing a "terrorist".

Meanwhile, in Gaza, four Palestinians, including a pregnant woman and a boy, were killed in an Israeli airstrike on Sunday, hospital officials said.

The strike hit a house in Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza, killing a couple and their young son. The fourth victim was taken to Awda Hospital in Nuseirat. —*PTI*

Saudi downs drones as Iran denies involvement

RIYADH/TEHRAN, 15 MARCH

Saudi Arabia has intercepted and destroyed 10 drones targeting Riyadh and the eastern regions. This follows an announcement that Saudi destroyed two other drones.

This sequence of events follows a wave of hostilities earlier in the week, where Saudi intercepted nearly 50 drones.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said the attack was not linked to Iran, according to Al Jazeera.

Following the interception of 10 drones, Iranian Foreign Minister Seyyed Abbas Araghchi said that Iran is ready to form a probe committee to review recent airstrikes. "We are ready to form a committee with regional countries... Our attacks only target US linked bases," he said —*ANI*

WHO condemns killing of 14 health workers in Lebanon

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus confirmed that 14 health workers were killed in Lebanon after a strike on the Bourj Qalaouiyeh primary health centre late Friday. Describing the event as a "tragic development", he highlighted the ongoing assault on Lebanon's healthcare system in the escalating regional crisis. He noted that the casualties included doctors, paramedics, and nurses.

US orders restoration of California offshore oil ops

On Friday, US Energy Secretary Chris Wright directed a Texas-based oil and gas company to restore operations in Southern California waters. Invoking the Defence Production Act to restore Sable Offshore Corp's Santa Ynez unit aims to address supply disruption. The unit includes three rigs in federal waters, offshore and onshore pipelines, and the Processing Facility. The facility can produce about 50,000 barrels of oil.

CLASHES AROUND THE WORLD

PAKISTAN HITS MILITARY FACILITIES, 'TERRORIST HIDEOUTS' IN AFGHANISTAN

KABUL, 15 MARCH

In a fresh spate of strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan's armed forces on Saturday hit military facilities and 'terrorist hideouts' in southern Kandahar.

According to the state-run Pakistan Television on Sunday the military "effectively" destroyed equipment storage facility in southern Kandahar province besides the technical support infrastructure. The storage facility was being used "by Afghan Taliban and terrorists against innocent Pakistani civilians," reported the television channel.

Pakistan military also reportedly struck a tunnel in Kandahar that housed technical equipment of the Afghan Taliban and "Fitna al-Khawarij" or Pakistani Taliban armed group. A military note said the strikes would continue till the Taliban government in Afghanistan addressed Pakistan's main security concerns. —*AGENCIES*

AFTER WEEKS, TAIWAN SEES CHINESE JET PRESENCE AHEAD OF TRUMP'S VISIT

HONG KONG, 15 MARCH

Taiwan Defence Ministry detected 26 Chinese military aircraft around the island on 14 March, with 16 of them entering its central and southwestern Air Defence Identification Zone. Seven naval ships were spotted around the island.

Taiwan didn't report any Chinese military planes that went beyond the median line and entered the zone for a week from 27 February to 5 March.

The drop coincided with the annual meeting of China's legislature.

Another factor could be China's desire to calm waters weeks before a visit by US President Donald Trump, said analysts.

Some observers also suggested the decline may be driven by a shift to a next phase in China's military training and military modernization.

China has vowed to seize the island using force if it is necessary. —*PTI*

KIM OBSERVES TEST OF ROCKET LAUNCH SYSTEMS WITH DAUGHTER

SEOUL, 15 MARCH

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, accompanied by his teen daughter, observed a live-fire test of multiple rocket launch system, a likely response to ongoing US-South Korean military training that North Korea views as invasion rehearsal.

Kim watched twelve 600mm-calibre, ultraprecision rocket launchers off North Korea's east coast on 14 March. South Korea's military detected about 10 ballistic missiles fired from North Korea's toward the eastern sea. South Korea's National Security Council called the launches a provocation that violated UN Security Council resolutions that bans any ballistic activities by North Korea. Kim said the drill would expose enemies within the 420-kilometer striking range. —*PTI*

CRACKDOWN ON POSTS

19 Indians among 35 to face trial in UAE over fake videos

DUBAI, 15 MARCH

The United Arab Emirates has ordered the arrest and expedited trial of 35, including 19 Indians, for publishing misleading and fabricated video clips on social media amid regional tensions linked to the war in Iran.

In a statement carried by the state news agency Emirates News Agency, UAE Attorney-General Hamad Saif Al Shamsi said the action followed continuous monitoring of digital platforms during the unfolding regional developments.

He said the suspects exploited the situation to spread misinformation intended to mislead the public and undermine national security, order and stability.

Investigations found that some videos shared authentic footage showing air defence systems intercepting attacks, along with clips of projectiles on the ground or crowds observing events. However, other material circulated by the accused allegedly included fabricated footage generated using artificial intelligence, falsely depicting explosions, strikes on prominent landmarks and large fires with smoke rising across various parts of the UAE.

According to the attorney-general, some clips also exploited children's emotions by falsely implying security threats.

Others claimed military facilities in the country had been destroyed or misrepresented incidents in other countries as occurring in the UAE in an attempt to spread anxiety and mislead public opinion.

The public prosecution has begun interrogating the suspects and ordered their detention pending trial.

Authorities said such acts are punishable by imprisonment of at least one year and a fine of no less than AED 1,00,000. —*PTI*

India's gems & jewellery exports rise 3.86% in Feb

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

India's gems and jewellery exports increased 3.86 per cent year-on-year to Rs 24,340.05 crore in February, according to GJEPC. In the same month last year, exports were Rs 22,460.13 crore. From April 2025 to February 2026, total exports were nearly flat at Rs 2,28,230.06 crore versus Rs 2,18,737.62 crore last year. Despite global challenges, the sector showed resilience, with diversification into the UAE, Australia, and support from Hong Kong. Recent US tariff changes benefited studded jewellery, but clarity is awaited on final tariffs for natural diamonds and loose stones. Export of cut and polished diamonds fell 0.84 per cent, while lab-grown diamonds grew 1.85 per cent. Gold jewellery exports rose 3.23 per cent, and silver jewellery surged 123.77 per cent. *—PTI*

Adani Gas cuts price for certain industrial users

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Adani Total Gas Ltd has cut the price of excess natural gas supplied to certain industrial customers to Rs 82.95 per standard cubic metre (SCM) from Rs 119.90 per SCM, effective 6.00am on 16 March, as upstream gas prices softened amid ongoing supply disruptions. The city gas joint venture of Adani Group and France's Total Energies said the revision aims to pass on the benefit of lower upstream prices to customers while maintaining system stability and equitable distribution of gas during the current supply constraints. Following the disruption in India's LNG supplies, ATGL had asked commercial and industrial customers to curtail consumption to 40 per cent of their contracted volumes. Spot market rates were applied to consumption beyond this threshold. *—PTI*

NHAI to revise FASTag annual pass fee to '3,075

NEW DLHI, 15 MARCH

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) is set to revise the applicable fee for the FASTag Annual Pass, increasing the rate from the current Rs 3,000 to Rs 3,075 for the 2026-27 Financial Year. According to the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, this new fee structure takes effect on 1 April, 2026. The adjustment follows the regulatory framework established under the National Highways Fee (Determination of Rates and Collection) Rules, 2008. The revised rate applies specifically to eligible non-commercial vehicles equipped with a valid FASTag. This facility remains available at approximately 1,150 fee plazas across the network of National Highways and National Expressways *—ANI*

DGCA eases flight duty time norms for Air India

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

Aviation safety watchdog Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has provided temporary relaxations in flight duty norms for Air India's long-haul flights as the airline is taking longer routes due to the airspace curbs amid the Middle East conflict, sources said on Sunday. With Iranian and Iraqi airspace restrictions, Air India is taking the Egypt route for European and North American flights, which means longer flying hours. DGCA has given certain relaxations in pilot Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) norms till 30 April, the sources told PTI. There were no comments from Air India and DGCA on the FDTL norm relaxations. Sources say that Air India has been violating the relaxation by planning its Jeddah flight, which has an FDP of 11.45am. For a single landing, the maximum FT and FDP are 10 hours and 13 hours, respectively. FT is the total time from the moment an aeroplane first moves for the purpose of taking off until the moment it finally comes to rest at the end of the flight. *—PTI*

FinMin amends public float rules for IPO-bound firms

The rules enable imposing penalties for non-compliance

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Finance Ministry has amended rules for minimum public offers floated by companies for getting listed on stock exchanges and linked it with post-issue capital.

The rule also allows recognised stock exchanges to impose penalties on companies for non-compliance with public shareholding norms committed before the amendment rules came into force.

The Securities Contracts (Regulation) Amendment Rules, 2026, notified on 13 March, states that companies with post-issue capital of more than Rs 1,600 crore and below Rs 5,000 crore will have to increase their public shareholding to at least 25 per cent within three years from the day of listing in the manner specified by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi).

The rules further state that at least 2.5 per cent of each class of securities must be offered to the public at the time of listing, irrespective of the post-issue threshold.

It also said that a company with post-issue capital of up to Rs 1,600 crore, at least 25 per cent of each class of equity shares or debentures convertible into equity shares issued by the company must be offered to the public.

If the post-issue capital is more than Rs 1,600 crore, but less than Rs 4,000 crore, the company will have to offer shares equivalent to Rs 4,000 crore.

For companies with post-issue capital of above Rs 4,000 crore, but less than or equal to Rs 5,000 crore, the public offer must be at least 10 crore of each class of equity shares or convertible debentures issued by the company.

Companies with post-issue capital of above Rs 5,000 crore, but less than or equal to Rs 1 lakh crore, must offer shares equivalent to Rs 1,000 crore and at least 8 per cent of each class of shares or convertible debentures issued by the company to the public. *—PTI*

OIL PRICES ROSE TO $103 FROM $70

Oil firms consider lower refinery prices to limit loss

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

State-owned oil marketing companies (OMCs) are considering paying refineries a price lower than the imported rates of petrol and diesel to limit mounting losses from a retail fuel price freeze.

International oil prices have risen from about USD 70 per barrel before the West Asia conflict to over USD 100, but retail petrol and diesel prices in India have remained unchanged, forcing OMCs to absorb the impact.

One option under consideration is either freezing or fixing a discount on the refinery transfer price (RTP) - the internal price at which refineries sell fuel to marketing arms - to effectively pay refineries less than the import-parity cost of the fuels like petrol and diesel. The proposed move would prevent refiners from fully passing on higher crude costs through RTP.

While Indian Oil Corporation Ltd, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd can offset part of the hit between refining and marketing operations, standalone refiners Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd (MRPL), Chennai Petroleum Corporation Ltd (CPCL) and HPCL-Mittal Energy Ltd (HMEL) that rely on market-linked RTP for revenue could face a sharper margin squeeze.

Petrol and diesel in India have been priced on an import parity basis, meaning the fuels are valued as if they were imported. Refinery transfers of these products to oil marketing companies were based on import parity price until June 2006, after which the government adopted trade parity pricing that assigns 80 per cent weight to import parity price and 20 per cent to export parity price *—PTI*

FPI selloff continues; '52,704 cr withdrawn in last fortnight

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Foreign investors withdrew Rs 52,704 crore (approximately USD 5.73 billion) from domestic equities in the first fortnight of March amid escalating tensions in West Asia, the depreciation of the rupee, and concerns over the impact of high crude oil prices on India's growth and corporate earnings.

The latest sell-off comes after foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) infused Rs 22,615 crore into Indian equities in February, the highest monthly inflow in 17 months.

Prior to that, FPIs were net sellers for three consecutive months, withdrawing Rs 35,962 crore in January, Rs 22,611 crore in December and Rs 3,765 crore in November, according to depository data.

So far in March (until 13 March), FPIs have sold equities worth about Rs 52,704 crore in the cash market and remained net sellers on all trading days during the month.

Market experts attributed the pullout mainly to rising geopolitical tensions in West Asia.

Sector-wise, IT has seen the largest outflows in 2025 so far, with FPIs pulling out about Rs 74,700 crore amid subdued revenue growth, tariff-related uncertainty and weaker global tech spending. FMCG followed with nearly Rs 36,800 crore in outflows due to slowing urban consumption and margin pressures, said Aditya Shankar, Co-founder of Centricity WealthTech. *—PTI*

Top 10 firms' mcap falls by Rs 4.48 lakh crore

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The combined market valuation of the top-10 firms eroded by Rs 4.48 lakh crore last week, in tandem with a steep decline in equities.

Last week, the BSE benchmark Sensex tanked 4,354.98 points or 5.51 per cent, and the NSE Nifty dropped 1,299.35 points or 5.31 per cent as surging crude prices raised concerns over inflationary pressures and global economic stability amid the widening conflict in West Asia.

"The primary driver behind the market weakness was the sustained rise in crude oil prices following the escalating West Asia conflict. Brent crude surged past USD 101 per barrel, raising concerns over India's fiscal position and inflation outlook," Ajit Mishra – SVP, research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

The market valuation of State Bank of India tumbled Rs 89,306.22 crore to Rs 9,66,261.05 crore.

HDFC Bank faced an erosion of Rs 61,715.32 crore to Rs 12,57,391.76 crore.

The valuation of Bajaj Finance dived Rs 59,082.49 crore to Rs 5,32,053.54 crore and that of Tata Consultancy Services tanked Rs 53,312.52 crore to Rs 8,72,067.63 crore.

The market capitalisation (mcap) of ICICI Bank dropped by Rs 42,205.04 crore to Rs 8,97,844.78 crore and that of Bharti Airtel plunged Rs 38,688.78 crore to Rs 10,28,431.72 crore.

Reliance Industries' valuation fell by Rs 33,289.88 crore to Rs 18,68,293.17 crore.

The mcap of LIC diminished by Rs 31,245.49 crore to Rs 4,88,985.57 crore. *—PTI*

Solstice Data signs Rs 52,600 crore MoU in Kerala

T'PURAM, 15 MARCH

Dubai-based Solstice Data has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to invest Rs 52,600 crore in a major project at KINFRA Industrial Park in Mattannur, Kannur district.

The landmark agreement allocates 100 acres of land within the park for the company's facilities development, an official statement said.

The MoU was exchanged in Thiruvananthapuram between Raj Babu Thulaseedharan, Solstice Data's India Head, and Santhosh Koshy Thomas, Managing Director of KINFRA, in the presence of Industries Minister P Rajeev and Director P Vishnuraj. Solstice Data is a global leader in designing and operating AI-driven High-Performance Computing (HPC) data centres, managing over sixty projects across the US and Canada.

The company aims to realise its total investment over five to seven years. The park spans 175 acres, with 123 acres currently available for industry. *—PTI*

Vedanta to raise RS 2,575 cr through NCDs

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Vedanta Ltd is set to raise Rs 2,575 crore through a non-convertible debenture (NCD) issue after strong demand from institutional investors, including ICICI Prudential Mutual Fund, Kotak Mutual Fund and Aditya Birla Sun Life Mutual Fund, sources familiar said.

The mining major's base issue of Rs 2,000 crore was oversubscribed when it opened last week, prompting the company to exercise a Rs 575 crore greenshoe option, taking the total issue size to Rs 2,575 crore, they said. The issue closes this week.

The three-year unsecured, rated and listed debentures were priced at a coupon of 8.95 per cent, lower than the cost in the company's recent borrowings. The issue has been assigned an 'AA' rating by Icra Limited.

Other participants in the issuance included UTI Mutual Fund and ICICI Prudential Pension Fund. *—PTI*

LPG shortage threatens jobs in MSMEs

CHENNAI, 15 MARCH

A severe LPG shortage is pushing micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) towards an operational crisis, according to the Association of Indian Entrepreneurs. They have called for urgent intervention by central and state governments to prevent widespread job losses. Association National Chairman KE Raghunathan emphasised that for many small industries, commercial kitchens, and food processors, LPG is not just a fuel but a lifeline of daily production.

He stated, "When supply becomes uncertain and prices rise sharply, MSMEs simply cannot absorb the shock." He warned that unlike large corporations, MSMEs operate on thin margins, and a sudden energy cost spike or irregular LPG supply could force units

to cut production, reduce workforce, or shut down temporarily.

Raghunathan urged the government to direct LPG supplies to MSMEs and essential industries, reduce excise duty and VAT on petroleum fuels, and monitor hoarding and black marketing.

On 14 March, Tamil Nadu announced a Rs 2 per unit electricity subsidy for businesses switching to electric stoves, and factories using alternative fuels no longer need additional pollution control clearances. *—PTI*

Exporters plan early shipments and alternate routes

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Exporters logistics providers are minimising disruptions caused by the ongoing West Asia crisis by closely monitoring carriers, planning shipments in advance, and exploring alternative routes.

The exporting community said that businesses are also adjusting inventory, contracts, and schedules for flexibility.

Support measures, such as sharing regular advisories, engaging with shipping lines to manage surcharges, ensuring vessel/container availability, allowing flexibility in compliance timelines, and maintaining dialogue between industry bodies and government authorities, will help the domestic industry deal with this crisis. Ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia, especially around the Strait of Hormuz, are creating uncertainty for India's exports.

Exporters are monitoring the evolving situation, as surcharges and longer transit times impact cargo movement.

India's ready-made garment exports to eight countries in the region were USD 1.9 billion in 2024-25.

Shipping lines are rerouting shipments around the Cape of Good Hope, encircling Africa to avoid the Strait and Red Sea. *—PTI*

AI should be priced like electricity, water: Altman

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

OpenAI CEO **Sam Altman** said the demand for artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to rise as businesses and governments adopt artificial intelligence across sectors ranging from software development to scientific research.

He suggested that the business model for AI firms could increasingly resemble that of utilities. Rather than purchasing outright, users may pay for access to AI capabilities in much the same way they pay for electricity or water.

In such a model, intelligence would be delivered on demand, metered according to usage. As demand for AI accelerates worldwide, technology companies are racing to build vast infrastructure required to power it.

From massive data centres to electricity grids capable of sustaining them, the future of AI increasingly depends not only on algorithms and chips but also on energy, computing capacity, & global race to supply them.

The rapid rise of AI has set off an unprecedented surge in demand for computing power, forcing technology firms to rethink the scale of the infrastructure required to support the next generation of AI systems. *—Agencies*

CORRECTIVE ACTIONS INITIATED

4,000+ AI staff misused leisure travel policy

NEW DELHI/MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

Air India has detected large-scale discrepancies in the utilisation of its leisure travel policy, involving more than 4,000 employees and has initiated corrective actions, including imposing penalties on the erring staff, according to sources.

Loss-making Air India was acquired by the Tata Group in January 2022, and the airline, which has faced multiple headwinds in recent times, is also in the midst of implementing an ambitious transformation plan. The airline has more than 24,000 employees.

The sources in the know told PTI that the large-scale discrepancies in the use of Air India's Employee Leisure Travel (ELT) policy were detected after a detailed internal investigation.

The ELT policy allows a specified number of free air tickets for individual employees and their nominees, including spouse and parents.

Many employees were found to have misused the policy by showing those not related to them as relatives to avail the benefits. Some were reported to have even availed the free tickets and sold them to people at a higher price, the sources said.

A detailed set of queries sent to Air India on Thursday seeking comments on the issue and the actions taken remained unanswered.

Violations dating back to the last financial year, claims were also detected, sources said.

Specific details about the number of employees, the amount involved due to the misuse of the policy and the time period for which the violations have been detected could not be ascertained.

Heavy penalties were also imposed on many of the staff who indulged in such practices, the sources said. *—PTI*

Prabhu clinches silver medal at NCAA Indoor C'ships

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

India's Selva Prabhu produced a personal best on his way to clinching the silver medal in the men's triple jump event at the NCAA Indoor Championships in Fayetteville, USA. A silver medallist at the World Athletics U20 Championships in 2022 and the U20 national record holder, Prabhu breached the 17m barrier for the first time, producing a best jump of 17.05m on Saturday. With the effort, the 21-year-old, who is enrolled in Kansas State University, also set a national Indoor record. However, the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) has strict guidelines for the ratification of national records, which often lead to the non-recognition of performances achieved in foreign competitions.—*PTI*

PTI

Japan reaches semis after routing Philippines 7-0

SYDNEY, 15 MARCH

Toko Koga scored twice as Japan stayed on course for a third AFC Women's Asian Cup title with a 7-0 win over the Philippines in Sydney on Sunday, setting up a semifinal against South Korea. It was one-way traffic throughout, but Japan was kept at bay by the Philippines goalkeeper Nina Meollo until just before half-time. Mina Tanaka broke the deadlock with a scrappy close-range header before Koga doubled the lead from a corner. Japan accelerated after the break as Remina Chiba struck a right-footed shot in the 65th minute to make it 3-0.—*PTI*

Kochi to host India's last AFC AC 2027 Qualifiers

KOCHI, 15 MARCH

The Indian senior men's football team will play its last match of the AFC Asian Cup 2027 Qualifiers against Hong Kong at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Kochi on 31 March. This will mark the first time in 10 years that the venue will host the Blue Tigers. In March 2016, India faced Turkmenistan in a FIFA World Cup qualifier at the same venue. That was also the last time the Indian senior men's team played in Kerala. India, which is out of contention for a place in the AFC Asian Cup 2027, will aim to end its qualifying campaign with a win. Despite it being a dead rubber in the context of the qualifiers, as Hong Kong has also been eliminated, the match still carries significance, with FIFA ranking points on offer.—*PTI*

PTI

Kimi takes his first F1 win with victory in China

SHANGHAI, 15 MARCH

He's been defined by being Lewis Hamilton's successor and George Russell's teammate. Now Kimi Antonelli is a Formula 1 race-winner in his own right, and the second-youngest in history.The 19-year-old Italian pulled clear of an entertaining battle between Russell and the two Ferraris to take a commanding win at the Chinese Grand Prix on Sunday and share the podium with his teammate and Hamilton, the seven-time champion he replaced last year.It's a vindication of the gamble Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff took in picking the youngster, who'd joined Mercedes' junior program aged just 11, to replace an all-time great when Hamilton moved to Ferrari for 2025. There were plenty of doubters when Antonelli crashed 10 minutes into his practice debut.—*PTI*

Alcaraz's 16-game win streak ended by Medvedev

Medvedev will face second-seeded Sinner in final

INDIAN WELLS, 15 MARCH

Daniil Medvedev handed top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz his first loss of the year and advanced to the final at Indian Wells with a 6-3, 7-6 (3) victory.

The 11th-seeded Medvedev, from Russia, will face second-seeded Jannik Sinner of Italy. Sinner beat Alexander Zverev 6-2, 6-4.

Alcaraz had won 16 straight matches this year, including titles at the Australian Open and Qatar Open. But Medvedev ended the possibility of an Alcaraz vs. Sinner final. Medvedev had dropped his last four meetings against Alcaraz, including a loss in the Indian Wells final in 2024. This was Medvedev's first victory over him since the U.S. Open semifinals in 2023.

Sinner made quick work of Zverev, beating him in 1 hour, 23 minutes. Sinner notched six aces against the fourth-seeded Zverev.

Zverev won his first eight points on serve. But Sinner broke Zverev in both the fifth and seventh games to secure the first set. Sinner now leads the head-to-head series against Zverev 7-4.

Neither Medvedev nor Sinner has dropped a set yet in this tournament. Sinner has won his last three matches against Medvedev, including in the U.S. Open quarterfinals in 2024.

In the women's doubles final, Taylor Townsend and Katerina Siniakova beat Anna Danilina and Aleksandra Krunic 7-6 (4), 6-4. The victory marked Townsend's first at Indian Wells and Siniakova's second. Siniakova also won in 2023 alongside longtime partner Barbora Krejcikova.

In the men's doubles final, Guido Andreozzi and Manuel Guinard topped Arthur Rinderknech and Valentin Vacherot 7-6 (3), 6-3. In mixed doubles, Belinda Bencic and Flavio Cobolli beat top-seeded Gabriela Dabrowski and Lloyd Glasspool 6-3, 2-6, 10-7.—*PTI*

1ST T20I

SA hammer NZ by seven wickets

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, 15 MARCH

South Africa team with four players on debut rolled World Cup finalist New Zealand for 91 in 14.3 overs and went on to win the first T20I on Sunday by seven wickets.

Opener Connor Esterhuizen anchored the South Africa reply with an unbeaten 45 from 48 balls as the Proteas won with 20 balls to spare. He was supported by Dian Forrester, also on debut, who stayed with him for more than six overs and was 16 not out at the end.

Esterhuizen finished the chase with a six off Kyle Jamieson from the fourth ball of the 17th over.

New Zealand's spinners helped to make a fight of it, and captain Mitchell Santner finished with 1-8 from his four overs on a turning pitch at Bay Oval.

"I think all the plans paid off and the execution was top-notch from our bowlers," South Africa captain Keshav Maharaj said. "It was a young bowling lineup, but whatever we asked them to do, they stood up. It was a little nervy towards the end, but it showed the maturity in Connor and Dian in the way they played to take it over the line." New Zealand had eight players missing from its World Cup squad, including its top-six batters from the team that lost the final against India by 96 runs and beat South Africa by nine wickets in the semifinals.

South Africa 93 for 3 (Esterhuizen 45*, Santner 1-8) beat New Zealand 91 all out (Neesham 26, Mokoena 3-26, Coetzee 2-14, Baartman 2-22) by seven wickets —*PTI*

It's great to see Indian cricket being realised on field: Dravid

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

Former India captain and head coach Rahul Dravid on Sunday said the country's rich cricketing potential is now translating into tangible success, with a string of victories in global tournaments reflecting the talent long present in Indian cricket.

India has been on a winning spree in ICC events, winning each of the last two men's T20 World Cups, women's ODI World Cup, men's U-19 World Cup, as well as the women's U-19 T20 World Cup over the last two years.

Dravid, honoured with the Col CK Nayudu Lifetime Achievement Award during the BCCI's annual awards function, told Star Sports, "It just kind of feels right, right?""Almost everything is coming together at this point, where Indian cricket has always had great potential, and it's (about realising that potential on the field as well. Off the field, I think we've always had everything we needed, and on the field, it's been great to see that potential being realised.

"Dravid said the success is due to various factors, from players to administrators and fans, coming together."It's been phenomenal. It's just been amazing to see the way Indian cricket has grown over these three decades," he said, reflecting on the time he made his debut in 1996.

Indian cricket has always had amazing talent. We've always had really good administrators. We've always had really good coaches, and we've been able to back that up with incredible infrastructure. We've always had a fantastic domestic system, (a) very good junior cricket system.""... and some of the most incredible fans in the world. The kind of supporters and fans that we have deserve all of this to come together, to have success on the field.

It's amazing to see how that all of that is coming together now."Dravid, who coached India to the T20 World Cup win in 2024, credited the current side for living up to the expectations."It was just lovely to see... Just the performance of the world T20 side, the expectations were immense.—*PTI*

WORLD BOXING FUTURES CUP

Chandrika clinches gold as India finishes with 5 medals

BANGKOK, 15 MARCH

India concluded its campaign at the World Boxing Futures Cup with a haul of five medals, including one gold, here on Sunday.

Competing across the Youth Olympic weight categories, the Indian U-19 men's and women's teams delivered a series of assured performances. Leading the charge was Chandrika Pujari, who delivered a commanding performance in the women's 51 kg final to defeat Uzbekistan's Mardonova Nazokat with a unanimous decision to stand atop the podium.

Three Indian boxers finished with silver medals after reaching the finals in their respective categories. Gunjan (48kg) went down to her opponent from England by a 5-0 decision, while Joyshree Devi (54kg) fought hard but lost 4-1 to a boxer from the United States. In the men's 50kg category, L. Ambekar Meetei also settled for silver after losing his final bout to Ukraine.Earlier in the tournament, Radhamani Longjam (57kg) had secured a bronze medal. —*PTI*

Karan Singh clinch ITF M25 singles title

Third seed Philip Sekulic of Australia caused a minor upset when he defeated second seed Karan Singh of India in straight sets to win the men's singles title at the Central Excise and CGST - ITF M25 Tournament held at the Bengal Tennis Association Complex in Kolkata on Sunday. Sekulic produced a powerful and controlled performance throughout the match and capitalised on an error-prone display from Karan to secure a 6-1, 7-6(1) victory. The Australian dominated the opening set, dictating the rallies with a strong baseline game and breaking Karan twice to take the set comfortably at 6-1. Karan looked more confident in the second set and briefly shifted the momentum. He broke Sekulic in the fourth game and raced to a 4-1 lead, raising hopes of stretching the match to a deciding set. However, Sekulic quickly regained control, breaking Karan twice and holding his serve to level the contest. The Indian managed to break back to make it 5-5, and the closely fought set eventually progressed to a tie-breaker. Sekulic produced near-flawless tennis in the tie-break, racing to a dominant 7-1 win to seal the set and the championship.

Former Pak captain Sarfaraz announces retirement

KARACHI, 15 MARCH

Wicketkeeper-batter Sarfaraz Ahmed, the only Pakistani captain to win two major ICC tournament finals against traditional rivals India, on Sunday announced his retirement from all forms of cricket. Sarfaraz, who last played for the national team in a Test match against Australia at Perth in December 2023, revealed his decision through a statement issued by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB).

A source said that the formal announcement will now allow the PCB to appoint him as head coach of the national Test team on a long-term basis.

The post of the Test team head coach has been lying vacant since the PCB ended the contract of all-rounder Azhar Mahmood, who served as interim head coach of the red ball team last year.

Sarfraz, who turns 39 in May, was recently also appointed as a member of the national selection committee after being named as mentor and manager of the Pakistan under-19 and Shaheens squads.

Sarfaraz played a first-class game as recently as last October but said in the statement he now wants to focus on his other roles.—*PTI*

Pep says PL title race not over

LONDON, 15 MARCH

Manchester City faces an uphill struggle to regain its Premier League crown after dropping points again in a 1-1 draw at West Ham United on Saturday night, but coach Pep Guardiola insisted his side would not give up on trying to reel in leader Arsenal.

About an hour before kick-off at the London Stadium, to the north of the capital, Arsenal was struggling to break down Everton and seemed to be giving City a golden opportunity to cut the gap at the top.

But a late Arsenal victory was followed by a tepid performance from City, which, for all its possession and passing, could only score once against a West Ham side fighting for Premier League survival.

The result leaves City nine points off Arsenal with eight games to play, though with a game in hand and a potentially key clash against its closest rival at Etihad Stadium next month.

Guardiola himself had suggested the title race could be over if City dropped points against West Ham, but when that was put to him, he asked, "Who said?"

When he was reminded he had said it, Guardiola told TNT Sports: "No, it's not over because we did not lose." Guardiola accepted, however, that City's lack of cutting edge was what had cost it once more this season.

"They did everything, they fought, 24 shots, I don't know how many. We had to be better in the final third, we didn't do it, and that's all," Guardiola told reporters. —*PTI*

WEST ASIA WAR

Formula 1 calls off April races in Bahrain

SHANGHAI, 15 MARCH

Formula 1 and its governing body, FIA, said the Grand Prix races in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia will not happen in April because of safety concerns related to the Iran war.

Both countries have been struck during Iran's response after the United States and Israel launched a wave of attacks on Iran.

The announcement was made early Sunday morning in Shanghai ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix.

"Due to the ongoing situation in the Middle East region, the Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Grands Prix will not take place in April," F1 said. "While several alternatives were considered, it was ultimately decided that no substitutions would be made in April." F1 was due to race in Bahrain on April 12 and in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah on April 19.

"While this was a difficult decision to take, it is unfortunately the right one at this stage considering the current situation in the Middle East," said Stefano Domenicali, president and CEO of F1.

The FIA said the two races "will not take place in April" and that no replacements would be organised.

"The FIA will always place the safety and well-being of our community and colleagues first. After careful consideration, we have taken this decision with that responsibility firmly in mind," FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem said. The FIA didn't explicitly rule out rescheduling the races and, along with F1, did not use the words "cancel" or "postpone" in announcing the series would not be in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia next month. —*PTI*

Tesfay sets 2nd-fastest-ever women's marathon time

BAHRAIN, 15 MARCH

Fotyen Tesfay ran the second-fastest race in women's marathon history as she triumphed in Barcelona on Sunday.

The 28-year-old Ethiopian completed the 26.2 miles (42.2 kilometres) in 2 hours 10 minutes 53 seconds in what was her first-ever competitive marathon. Kenya's Ruth Chepngetich set the record in 2024 in Chicago, but is currently serving a three-year suspension for doping, which annulled her results from March 2025 onwards."Today was fantastic not what I was expecting, but it is good," said Tesfay."I planned to attack the world record, but today there was a lot of wind, and I was not able to push in the last part of the race."Today I did not succeed, but in the next marathon I would like to try for the world record."Tesfay came in nearly eight minutes quicker than Kenyan runner-up Joan Jepkosgei Kiplimo, while Ethiopian Zeineba Yimer finished third. In the men's marathon, Ugandan Abel Chelangat triumphed with a time of two hours, four minutes, and 57 seconds, beating out Kenyans Patrick Mosion and Jonathan Samanayo Korir. —*PTI*